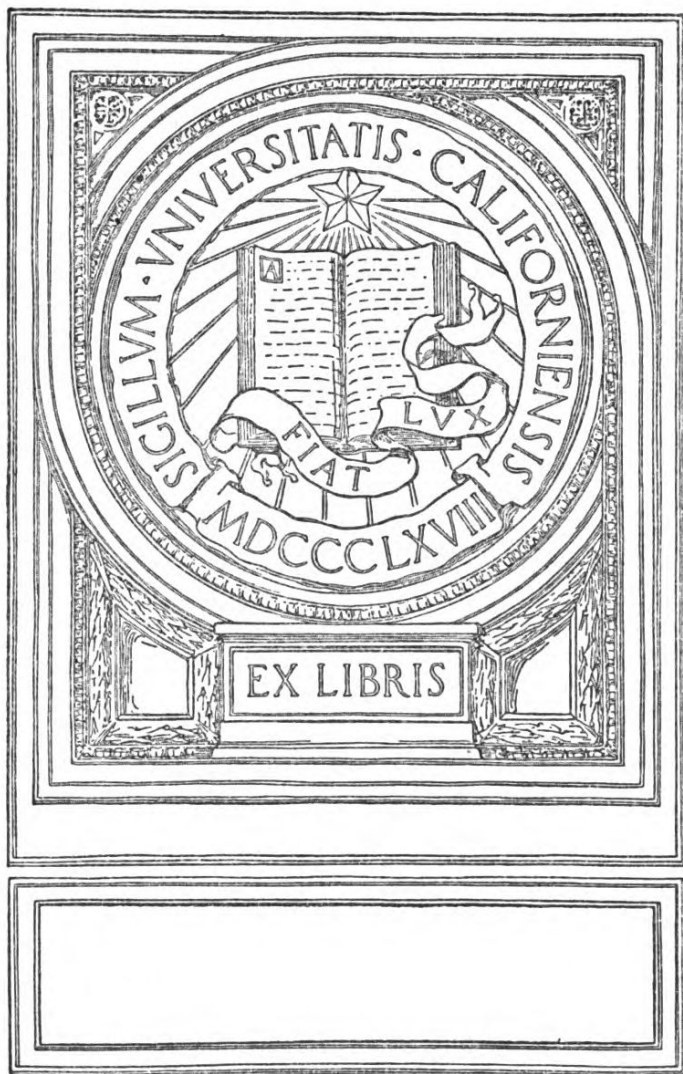


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Camp Follower

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THE STORY OF A SOLDIER'S WIFE

Camp Follower

BY BARBARA K LAW

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While the events of this chronicle occurred in the army camp and the town as named in the text and exactly as described, certain of the people who appear are composite portraits of various types encountered. Outside of the principals, no character is based on any one individual.

THIS IS A RANDOM HOUSE WARTIME BOOK



IT IS MANUFACTURED UNDER
EMERGENCY CONDITIONS AND
COMPLIES WITH THE GOVERN-
MENT'S REQUEST TO CONSERVE
ESSENTIAL MATERIALS IN
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A

For Spence

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Note

There are many kinds of camp followers in the vicinity of American army camps. There is the stray dog who comes from nowhere to make his home close to an abundant mess hall. There is the merchant who moves his business into an army-camp town and trades his goods for the crisp bills and shiny silver that the government pays to its soldiers. There is the prostitute who sets up shop in a trailer or nearby boarding house. And then there is the woman who camp follows neither for money nor for food, but because for the time being she feels herself practically a part of the Army—the soldier's wife.

B. K.

Camp Follower

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THE TRIP OUT

LIKE MOST OF Washington, D. C.'s wartime residents, I knew Union Station well. I knew it as a place that one must go through in order to get out of Washington. It was strictly a means to an end for me, and I had always dreaded the process of shoving, waiting and dodging. On the evening of April 1st, however, when I caught the *Jeffersonian* to leave Washington for good, I loved the whole familiar, dull procedure.

The wait at the train gate was longer than usual, a whole hour, and the waiting mob packed me in more solidly than I had ever been packed. But the station building seemed lofty and exciting, and I enjoyed every minute of it.

When the train gates finally opened, I lugged my bags down the length of the platform, smiling at the

soldiers who sprinted past me. I was even, for a change, amused when I found my car was, as usual, the last and most bedraggled of a long line of bedraggled coaches hooked on behind a gaudily painted, streamlined engine. The steward showed me to my seat, which turned out to be stuck in a permanently reclining position, and I tipped him lavishly and settled to look around me.

The people who milled through the aisles were soldiers, carrying their small canvas bags, business men, weary after a day of priority seeking, and women in flowery spring hats. The confusion was considerable, as all the seats in the car were reserved, and finding the numbers of them entailed unbuttoning and peering under the Pullman Company's neat white antimacassars.

I speculated who among this crowd was to be my seat companion for the next day and night, hoping it wouldn't be a particularly imperious lady with two fur coats over her arm who was haggling with her porter; hopeful that it might be the stocky soldier who reminded me of my brother-in-law as he lazily searched for his seat. But I didn't spot the girl who, it turned out, was to sit next to me, until, with a flurry of tweed coat, slim high heels and baggage, she plumped down beside me.

I caught a glimpse of exceptionally white skin, red hair under a white turban and curiously reddened eyes, and then she turned her head away.

Suddenly, as though realizing that for better or worse, we were to be together for the next twenty-four hours, she looked at me and smiled, and I noted that she had a pretty face, made up of individually unpretty

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features. She introduced herself as Tracy Mead, told me she was a government worker, offered me a stick of chewing gum, and in less than thirty minutes, I was showing her a picture of my husband.

He had sent me the picture—taken at one of Camp Crowder's quick-photo places—saying: "The only backdrop they had, honey, was a cutout of a large, fat man in a bathtub. If I had had my head attached to his body in the approved manner, it might have been a better picture, at that."

The picture showed him standing so straight that he seemed to lean over backward, and his new GI cap was obviously too big. But it was my only photograph of Spencer in uniform, and I had shown it to a surprising number of people.

"Gosh," Tracy said, "he's a good-looking boy. Has he been in long?" I explained that he had been drafted six weeks ago.

"And you're going out to live with him while he's in training?"

"I'm going to live as close as possible," I said.

Tracy said she was taking two weeks' annual leave from her government job, and, knowing how difficult it is for government workers actually to get those days of leave that pile up on paper for them, I asked her how she had managed it.

Immediately I realized I had asked the wrong question, for tiny red veins began to appear under her white skin, and I thought she was going to cry. She pulled a telegram out of her purse, and handed it to me.

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Even before I read it, the blurry stars stamped at the top told me that it was a death notice. It was her brother, killed on a high-tension wire. She had been called home for the funeral.

Either by determination or by the process of confiding in someone, Tracy's depression seemed to have been wiped away. My condolences were clumsy, but Tracy seemed grateful, and she chatted with nervous animation about her brother, her home and her parents. Her face softened when she told me about her fiancé, an aviation cadet, who was stationed at an air base near her home in Texas.

"After the funeral," she said, "I think I'll sneak in a visit to him. And, you never can tell, he may just decide I should stay. It certainly wouldn't break my heart to leave Washington." She showed me her picture of him, which was as bad as mine of Spencer, and I was equally polite.

Within an hour we had exchanged addresses, borrowed each other's cigarettes, and were friends. We compared Washington experiences, groused mildly about the bureaucratic annoyances of our particular agencies, and groaned over housing conditions.

"I like Washington all right," Tracy said, "but gee, it costs such a lot to live there. Why, I didn't even have a fur coat when I came, and you know, there are so many places that you just feel funny going to if you don't have a fur coat."

We stopped talking about ourselves to watch two lieutenants squirming in their seats across the aisle.

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They had had to put their suitcases under their feet because the baggage rack had already been stuffed with duffle bags when they boarded the train. Now they were trying to find some comfortable way to fit feet and bags into the limited space. I glanced at the two soldiers behind them—the owners of the duffle bags—who were watching the pantomime. One of them winked.

Tracy giggled and stretched her legs.

“I hope those gold braids are going a long way,” she said. “They’ll get mighty uncomfortable sitting like that. It’s good for them after the way they march around Washington like God Almighty.” Tracy’s enjoyment of their discomfort was based on six months of working for the War Department.

She pushed a stray end of red hair back under the turban she was wearing, and scratched her head.

“Bobby pin’s sticking me,” she explained.

“Look, honey,” she said suddenly, “do you drink?” I said sure. “Well, I’m a little drunk, you know. I have been ever since I got the telegram, and I’m going to stay that way till I get within sobering-up distance of my parents. I’ve got a bottle in my suitcase, Johnny Walker, very good. Will you have a drink with me?”

I hadn’t realized she’d been drinking, and she certainly wasn’t drunk. I said I’d love a drink.

She rummaged through her bags, imposing on a bored soldier in front of us to get them down from the rack. As she poked around in the first one, opening it just enough to insert her hand, the garter of a girdle flopped

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out the side. When she couldn't find the bottle in either bag, she said:

"I knew it, I knew it. Damn that roommate of mine for a prude. My roommate packed for me," she explained, "and I made her promise to put the bottle in, but she doesn't approve of my drinking. She's a sweet girl and all, but she doesn't drink and she doesn't smoke and she's been trying to reform me for months. I can just see her taking the bottle out and tucking it under something so I couldn't find it." We put the bags back on the rack and promised each other that we'd go into the club car later.

I decided that if I couldn't drink I might as well go ahead and eat. Tracy had already had dinner, so I set out alone to walk the gauntlet of soldiers between our car and the diner, trying not to grin at their whistles.

Standing cramped in the little entrance hallway to the diner, dodging back and forth to let the hurried but imperturbable waiters get glasses out of the cabinets, I waited a good hour. A slight and elderly private talked to me with excessive politeness, and a drunken sailor, who was pocketing glasses every time the cabinet was opened, reeled around me.

"I'm just back from the Solomons," he said. "Furlough, fifteen-day furlough. Have a glass." I didn't want a glass, so he pocketed that one, too. "Just in case," he said. They made stiff lumps under his snug uniform. With a mild blocking movement, the courtly soldier got between the sailor and me and, bowing slightly from the waist, he introduced himself, and asked me to have dinner with him.

THE TRIP OUT

It turned out that Joplin—the town I was headed for—was twelve miles away from where his wife lived. I promised to call her and he wrote out her address—forming his letters with the same slow care he used in talking and eating. Later that evening, he found me in my seat, and wanted me to read his wife's latest letter. She was a devout woman, who had turned to God completely when he had gone, the soldier told me.

"She's very fine, very Christian," he said. "She's just the finest little wife in the world." I saw pictures of her and his children. The letter, full of stilted intimacies, embarrassed me as though I had broken into their bedroom by mistake, and I knew my smile was growing stiff on my face. It was a relief when he left.

Tracy and I had no luck getting into the club car. But a soldier who was also trying to get in had some whisky, and though squeamishness kept us from drinking out of the bottle, when he posted a friend to guard for MPs and produced paper cups, we were grateful for a drink. The liquor was raw, and very warm from being carried under his blouse. We drank quickly because the paper cups tended to curl and dissolve.

"So you're going to Crowder," the soldier with the whisky said. "Your husband must be in the Signal Corps." I said he was. The soldier shook his head and poured himself another drink. "Crowder's a hell-hole," he said. "What's he doing out there?" I explained that he was in radio school.

"That's O.K.," the soldier said. "He'll get a good technical rating out of that. That's the best thing to get in this Army."

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"Better than being an officer?" I asked.

"Oh, God, yes," he said. "What in hell does an officer know? When you're a technician you really know what you're talking about, and you can tell your officers which end's up."

"Do you like the Army?" I said.

"Guys don't like the Army," he answered soberly. "They're just in it. It's all right for what it is. I get mighty tired of these damn uniforms, though." He brushed his hand impatiently against his pants, and then grinned. "At least we get all the meat we want," he said.

The soldier took his third drink out of the bottle, bracing himself against the jolting of the train.

"Jesus, I wish I had a wife," he said. "The Army'd be all right that way."

"Do you think it's a good idea to go out and live near my husband?" I was fishing for assurance.

"What else?" the soldier said. "God, it's a wonderful break for a guy." I could feel my face getting red with pleasure.

The lights were out in the coaches when we started back to our car, and we fumbled our way down the aisles, brushing against outflung arms, and feeling our way from chairback to chairback. When we found our seat, Tracy went right to sleep, curled like a pretzel in her chair. She tended to uncurl during the night, but she didn't wake when I carefully extracted a heel or elbow that had drifted over into my ribs.

I went to the washroom early in the morning, stepping

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over a sleeping soldier who was lying across the doorway like a watchdog. It took a long time to get into the diner again, and I found the sailor with the bulging glasses under his blouse waiting there, too. He appeared to have been there all night. He wanted the whole bunch of us to have a good-morning drink, and he pulled out innumerable glasses, polished them neatly with his handkerchief, and offered them to the hungry crowd. A few male civilians took him up on it, not to be outdone by the boys in uniform.

We got into St. Louis about four, two hours late, just in time for me to board my train for Kansas City. Tracy—who had a wait between connections—saw me off, and I waved to the slight, sober, redheaded figure on the platform, knowing that in spite of our friendship and exchanged addresses, we'd probably never see each other again.

My new train was a streamliner—not only the engine but also the coaches—clean, slick, and comfortable, and my car was almost entirely filled with civilians, who haven't the gift of making themselves at home on trains as soldiers do. It was like stepping back into peacetime—no chatter, no moving around. The train got very crowded at Jefferson City with standees, their bags filling the aisles. I got up to give my seat to an elderly colored woman who was crippled, and the cold stares of the comfortably seated men in the car made me feel that if this was Missouri—the state I had come to live in—I wasn't going to like it.

The Kansas City station reminded me of Washington

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and, after spending ten nickels calling hotels for a room, I began to feel that the housing situation must be about the same, too. The soldiers and girls who had settled down on the station benches for the night, sleeping obliviously, seemed to have hit on the only solution, but, wanting a bath and aching for a chance to take my shoes off, I decided to try the Travelers Aid.

"Well, I think we can get you a room in a nice little family hotel," one of the women at the booth said. "Would that be all right? It isn't fashionable, but it's very clean." I was grateful at that point that she would even mistake me as a person who would demand something fashionable. I said I'd settle for anything which included a bathtub, and she clinched it with a telephone call. Although later I became familiar with the many services showered on soldiers and their wives, her real concern for my comfort seemed amazing to me that night. I remarked on it to a cheerful bunch of sailors who were sharing my cab.

"You got a room through what?" one of them asked.

"Through the Travelers Aid," I said.

He apparently thought the Travelers Aid was strictly a charitable organization.

"Look, girlie," he said, drawing out his wallet. "I can lend you some money. I know how it is to be broke."

He probably would have given it to me, too, though I was in fact so loaded down with cash and American Express checks that it almost scared me. Much to my embarrassment, when the cab stopped to let me off,

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the sailor took one look at my "little family hotel" and repeated his offer.

It certainly was the tireddest-looking establishment I've even been in. The rooms were large and clean but incredibly worn-out looking. The girl at the desk, who also manned the switchboard, ran the elevator, and brought clean towels to my room, demanded that I pay in advance. There were rules of the house posted in the elevator, and the whole looked like a cross between YWCA and one of the better flophouses. But the lumpy bed seemed heavenly and I went right to sleep.

In the station the next morning, I began to run into the society of wandering Army wives in whose company I was to spend the next few months. Lugging baggage, tired and lonely, but all excited, they were going to see their husbands, some for a visit, some for as long as possible. They were mostly young, mostly well dressed, mostly attractive. That morning there were hundreds of us congregated in the Kansas City station.

We stood in front of the train gate, jockeying for position, waiting. It isn't only the men in the Army who get used to waiting—the Army wives get used to it, too. Waiting in train stations, waiting for husbands who might be scouring pots in the messhalls and can't let you know. In time I was to learn the art of waiting—of stretching out little tasks and insignificant thoughts.

I noticed a sign posted at the train gate, saying, "Servicemen will board all trains before civilians." A fine idea, no doubt, but multiplied a hundred times—

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servicemen will get in diners first, servicemen will have first crack at sandwiches sold on trains, servicemen will have first choice of hotel rooms—it made me feel like an excessively useless object, or a member of a persecuted class.

The slacks-clad girl I sat next to on the train was weary. Two days on trains, a night spent in the Kansas City station “with a hell of a nice bunch of sailors,” had done the trick. She had been visiting her husband for a week at Camp Hale, “certainly the most Godforsaken spot on the globe,” she said.

“I stayed at the Guest House,” she told me. “There isn’t a town anywhere around. My God, you can’t imagine that place. The men weren’t allowed to come up to our rooms, and you had to hide in a telephone booth to kiss your husband goodnight. I finally left before I had to. My husband said he was getting frustrated.”

I hoped it wouldn’t be that bad at Crowder.

The car I was in was filled with wives going to Joplin or Neosho, a smaller town closer to the camp, to visit their husbands. One girl was balancing a bakery box. “She’s carried that cake all the way from Oregon,” a girl told me. Another girl was holding a young baby, and was heavily pregnant with her next.

In the car ahead of us was a bunch of selectees, branded by their lack of insignia, their new-looking uniforms, and the bald look of fresh GI haircuts. We saw them trooping back and forth to the diner, led by a sergeant. They seemed young and subdued and a little frightened. Like freshly sheared sheep being led to a

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sheep dip. I remembered everything my husband had told me about that trip, and I felt unexpectedly teary watching them. We all became silent as they filed through the car, and then giggled, embarrassed by our solemnity, when they were gone.

In four hours, we reached Joplin and I took a cab to the Connor Hotel where I was staying. There was a waiting line at the desk. I had a reservation but after hearing the clerk with well-exercised sympathy turn away person after person who also thought they had reservations, I began to get nervous.

"We may have a cancellation later," was the standard brush-off. "If you'll just have a seat, we'll call you."

A tall imperious woman of about forty, casually wearing mink, fought for her rights like the younger wives.

"A double for Colonel and Mrs. Thompson," the clerk repeated after her. He searched for the reservation and found it. "Twin beds, Mrs. Thompson?" he asked, in the brisk unconcerned way in which male drugstore clerks cater to intimate feminine needs.

"No," she said firmly. "A double bed, please." The girl behind me nudged me.

The next group at the desk was a whole family. A father, and mother and wife.

"We reserved two adjoining doubles, with twin beds," the father said. The clerk searched his register.

"Do they have to be adjoining, sir?" The young wife looked up hopefully, but the father insisted. The clerk

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found them what they wanted, and they went off behind the bellboy, the girl looking miserable.

Luckily Spencer's reservation had stuck, and I got into my room with no trouble. I persuaded a slim, tired little girl who had been two days on the train and a night in the station and was waiting for one of those doubtful cancellations, to come up with me and get a rest.

A call to the U.S.O. (I was learning the technique fast) got her a room, and I was left to wait until evening when Spencer would arrive.

I lingered over an indifferent sandwich as though it were a filet mignon, I bought a washcloth in the five-and-ten-cent store, and kept the clerk an unnecessarily long time explaining Missouri's state tax system to me. I wrote letters, bathed, napped and finally allowed myself the luxury of dressing.

When I had finished everything I had to read, had listened to voices in the hall until my stomach was churning with excitement, I finally went down to the lobby.

There the scene had changed. No longer cool, quiet and subdued, it was mobbed with soldiers, and it hummed with voices. The revolving doors never stopped revolving, the seats were all taken, soldiers circled around the desk and the entrance to the cocktail lounge four deep. They came so fast, and they looked so much alike in their standardized clothes, that I grew panicky, and hurried back to my room. So many women were sitting there twisting their handkerchiefs, with their eyes glued to the door searching each face. I didn't see

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how they could stand it. Back safely in my room, I remembered what a girl had told me in Washington.

"It's a shock when you first see your husband," she had said. "In strange clothes, and talking somehow differently. And the worst thing is that they even look different." I sat on the bed, staring at the door, half ready to laugh at myself, half ready to weep. My hands were perspiring, and I smoked cigarettes half through. Finally I went into the bathroom to comb my hair, and at that moment Spencer arrived.

My stomach settled into place, and my life as a camp follower was under way.



ROOM HUNT

NEVER very good at following directions—particularly the “Oh, you can’t miss it” kind—I walked around the central square of Neosho, Missouri three times before I spotted the Travelers Aid office.

I had already been room hunting along the residential streets for two hours that morning, ever since my bus from Joplin landed me in town. I had found nothing but advice, freely given by friendly homeowners, who had themselves no vacancies. All of them had told me to go to the Travelers Aid—the official housing agency for Army wives, and I had been directed to the square.

On my first lap, I was looking so hard for signs, that I didn’t notice much about the shops behind them. The second time around I began to get some impression of

ROOM HUNT

the town's business district, its clean modern town hall in the center making the squat little shops around the sides look untidy. I noticed barred windows on the top floor of the town hall, high above the surrounding buildings. "That's the county jail," a Neoshoan told me some time later. "The prisoners get a fine view of the town from up there."

On my third lap of the square, I stopped thinking about my room hunt long enough to wonder at the peculiar array of shops Neosho housed. There were the usual businesses—the groceries, the department store (which advertised belligerently "If we don't have it, you don't want it."), the five and tens, the beer joints and the movie house—but in addition there were at least ten military stores, and almost as many jewelers.

It was obvious that the military stores had moved in to get the Camp Crowder trade. When I examined one of the window displays of cheap jewelry stamped with Signal Corps insignia, I realized that the jewelry stores must have come to town for the same purpose.

Later Spence and I were to see these shops crowded on Saturday night with soldiers laying down hunks of their monthly pay for gifts that had little more than souvenir value. For themselves, the soldiers frequently bought useful things such as watches, but they also bought expensive identification bracelets and silver dog-tag chains—the kind of ornamental gadgets that I suspect most of them would have scorned in civilian life. "The G.I. substitute for a red tie," Spence called these ornaments.

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I had almost forgotten what I was looking for when I finally spotted the red, white and blue Travelers Aid sign down on a narrow side street. I found the office sandwiched between a drugstore and a cleaning establishment, at the top of a flight of echoing wooden steps.

The office was mobbed with girls when I went in, some of them obviously well-seasoned room hunters. They sat in the few camp chairs along the walls, and stood in rough queues at the desk, waiting to talk to the girl attendant. The only unfilled space in the room was a wide swath around a rotund stove which was radiating fiercely into the already overheated room.

The girl at the desk was talking to a small blonde with a husky, brown-eyed little girl at her side.

"How was that place on Wood Street you looked at?" she asked.

"Same story," the mother said. "She didn't want kids. Patty scares 'em all, don't you baby?"

"I'm an awful nuisance," the little girl said matter-of-factly.

"You'd think it was a sin for a soldier's wife to have a child," the mother said.

"Well, it makes it tough, all right," the worker agreed. "I may have something this afternoon, though, Mrs. Huston. Drop in then, will you?"

We all wanted the same thing, and we were all told that there might be some vacancies reported by afternoon. Each newcomer was urged to live in Joplin, and each felt as I did that it was too far from camp. I lit a cigarette, sat down as far from the stove as possible,

ROOM HUNT

and lingered after the others had gone, hating to hit the pavements again. I introduced myself to the girl at the desk, who was calm and efficient and pleasant. Her name was Margaret Lewis.

"Is your office always as crowded as this?" I asked.

"No, Monday's the worst day," Margaret said. "The wives come for the weekend, and decide to stay."

A soldier came in—red in the face, and obviously in a hurry.

"Can I leave a message here?" he asked. "I imagine my girl will come by here sooner or later. Her name's Lydia."

"Certainly," Margaret said. "What's the message?"

"Just tell her to leave my hat here, that I'll be in to pick it up later."

"All right. What's her last name?"

The soldier thought a moment.

"Lydia, Lydia something. It begins with a P. Lydia Pinkham," the soldier said. "That's it, Lydia Pinkham."

Margaret looked up at him. "You're sure?" she asked.

The soldier grinned. "No," he said. "But it sounds familiar. Anyway, she's got my hat. Tell her for God's sake that it isn't funny, and I've got to get that hat back. I've been dodging MPs all day." Without the slightest change of expression, Margaret wrote the message on a pad, with the Lydia Pinkham underlined.

"Don't forget my message now," the soldier warned, and he rushed out, his GI shoes clattering on the wooden steps. Margaret filed the message under P in her message file.

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Just then the phone rang. Margaret wrote as she listened, and then said: "Yes, certainly, I will, Mrs. Upton. Thanks so much for calling us." She copied what she had written on another piece of paper and handed it to me.

"You might try this one," she said. "I don't know what it's like, but it's a vacancy, at least. She won't be home till four, so try after that. Let me know what happens, will you? The woman has refused to rent the room to the last five girls I've sent over." She didn't explain further than that, and I took the slip eagerly.

On the way out I passed a girl sitting on the stairs, holding one of her shoes in one hand and rubbing her foot with the other.

"God, this town!" she said crossly. "My feet's killing me."

My feet were killing me, too, in another two hours. Margaret had told me that I might try the cabin courts on the edge of town, and with a mental picture of Spencer and me setting up housekeeping in a cozy little one-room house of our own, I trudged out the long street to look at some of them.

They were clustered on the main highway entering Neosho, interspersed with diners, groceries, the town's bowling alley and the Army prophylactic station.

The station was a clean, square little building, set back from the road, with a brightly painted sign reaching out to announce it. Over the door was a naked green light. Stop and go, I thought, all done in lights. Very neat.

ROOM HUNT

Two of the cabin courts had "No Vacancy" signs up, but the third—advertising "10 cabins, all strictly modern, 10"—had two vacancies, I found on digging the manager out from under a bed where she was cleaning.

Her name was Mrs. Morris, and she showed me around her establishment with obvious pride.

"Now this one here," she said, "is one of my very nicest. We just remodeled it, too. Careful of wet paint." The cabin was charming at first glance, with three large windows and baby-blue walls.

"And Venetian blinds," she said, pulling them up and down rapidly. "I just got them up, they make it pretty, don't they? They're mighty hard to get nowadays."

The bathroom was as spotless as the cabin, and almost as lacking in essential equipment. The furniture in the neat little room consisted of a bed, a straight chair holding an ashtray, and a small gas heater in one corner.

"The girls that've lived in here have just made themselves right at home," Mrs. Morris said. "The last one brought a radio and a little bedside lamp, and it was real cute."

"Where did she put her clothes?" I asked. There was no dresser in the room.

"Now, I don't really know," Mrs. Morris said cheerfully. "I never noticed. I guess she kept them in her suitcases."

"Could I see the closet?" I asked.

"Well, as a matter of fact, we haven't got around to

CAMP FOLLOWER

putting a closet in this cabin yet," Mrs. Morris said. "Most of the girls hang up their dresses on those hooks there." She pointed to two sagging hooks on the wall. She stood in the middle of the room, and looked around with satisfaction.

"It's cute, isn't it?" she said. I agreed that it was, and remembering the swarm of girls in Margaret's office, asking for rooms—rooms of any kind—I asked the price.

"Well," Mrs. Morris said, "I used to charge sixteen a week for this one, but now with the Venetian blinds, I'll have to charge seventeen." I multiplied quickly and found that the rent amounted to considerably more than we had paid for a whole apartment in Washington.

"Do you have a cabin without Venetian blinds?" I asked.

The next cabin—which cost only fifteen a week—had both dresser and closet, but Mrs. Morris obviously looked down on it.

"Of course, this one hasn't just been remodeled," she said. It, too, was scrupulously clean with orange and blue linoleum on the floor. I told her I wanted to look around a little more, but persuaded her to hold it for me until five when I'd call. Fifteen dollars appalled me, but it was cheaper than the hotel in Joplin and Neosho was closer to camp.

Talking about rents, I later asked Margaret if the OPA hadn't ever noticed Neosho.

"Sure," she said. "They came in here, and clamped down ceilings kind of indiscriminately, and people took their rooms off the market. Frankly, we were relieved

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when they went away. The cabin courts can't be touched anyway because they simply multiply their daily rate by seven to get a weekly rate."

On the way back to town, I stopped at an ugly but spacious stone house, set high on a bank which ran up from the sidewalk.

The woman who answered the door was so fat she had to sidle out onto the porch. Making her round face look even rounder, she had a thick braid of gray hair wound around her head, which had slipped rakishly over one ear.

"Well, I do have a girl moving out today," she said, when I asked if she had any vacancies. "But she's promised the room to a friend, I think." She turned laboriously and shouted back into the house.

"Gloria, that little girl from Atlantic City is taking your room, isn't she?"

From upstairs, Gloria shouted back that she was.

I heard a thump, like a shoe dropping, followed by a burst of laughter. The landlady smiled affectionately, and poked at the lopsided braid.

"I've got such a nice bunch," she said. "Five couples, and all of them just as sweet as they can be." I wondered automatically if the Missouri wind had messed my hair, and was glad that I had on my sole remaining pair of nylons.

"Well," she said, "I'm sorry I can't help you. I try to do everything I can for the Army wives, but I'm just full up to the rafters." I caught a glimpse of an unmade

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bed in the living room, imperfectly shielded by a screen, and wondered if one of her five couples lived there.

As she started to shut the door, Gloria shouted down the stairs.

"Mrs. Thompson, where are those panties I washed out yesterday?"

"They're in the kitchen, dear," Mrs. Thompson called. "I took them in off the line for you." She turned to me. "Gloria's so excited," she said tolerantly. "Her husband has a ten-day furlough before reporting to his new post." She suddenly remembered me. "I certainly hope you find something nice," she said.

I patiently covered whole streets of houses that afternoon, chatting with landladies and incumbent Army wives. The people were all friendly and talkative, but with one exception the answer was always no. The exception was a temporary room. I could have it for a week, the lady told me, but the couple, who had gone on furlough, would want it back after that.

"I have a lot of girls here," she said, leading me up the stairs. "When I first started renting, I put in a game room in the attic for them. This room is right off the game room."

It was, as a matter of fact, hardly off the game room. A partition that reached not quite to the top of my head cut off one corner of the large bare attic.

"The girls use the game room during the day, but it's very private up here at night," the landlady assured me.

"What about light?" I asked, noticing none in the room.

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"Well, I let the couple keep on the light in the game room," she said, "and it gives them plenty."

She explained the bylaws of the house. "The bathroom's on the first floor," she said. "I don't let the girls use my kitchen, it just makes too much confusion, you know, and I don't like any radios in the house. Also I don't like smoking, but I don't suppose you smoke, do you?" She didn't wait for an answer, and I hid the slightly tobacco-stained two fingers of my right hand, and decided it would be good for me to give up cigarettes, for a while, anyway. The room was eight dollars a week, and I said I'll call her back that afternoon.

"Well," she said as I left, "I hope for your sake that you find something permanent, dear, but if not you can stay here while you look around." It was phrased like an invitation—at eight dollars a week and no smoking.

As I came down the steps of the house, a cab coasting languidly along the street pulled up beside me.

"You look as though you're room hunting," the driver said. I told him I was. "Well, most all the girls in Neosho are," he said. He was a good-looking young man, and I involuntarily wondered—hating myself for the thought—why he wasn't in the Army.

"I know of a nice room," he said. "Right on the square. Want me to take you there? I'm going that way, anyway. I won't charge you."

Thinking how extraordinarily nice all Neoshoans were, I said hopefully:

"Do you really know of a room?"

"Sure," he said. "Just like I said. A nice one."

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"Look," I said, ready to grab at any chance. "Could you possibly give me the address, and I'll go by there later? I want to finish up this street first."

"Well, I can't remember the address, but I could drive you right there." He sounded a little devious.

"Which side of the square is it on?"

"Come on, hop in," the man said. "It only takes a minute in the cab." I refused, cursing myself for a suspicious fool when the young man shrugged his shoulders and drove away. But I was right, I discovered when I talked to Margaret about it later.

"Yes," she said. "I've heard of that stunt. Those places on the square are colorful spots. That's where most of the syphilis that the camp authorities have a fit about starts. I guess some of the cab drivers are in cahoots with the houses." I never saw a girl coming down the steps of one of the houses on the square after that without wondering.

By the time it was four, my feet and head ached, and I could feel a hole growing in the toe of my left stocking. As nervous as though I were looking for a job, I stopped in at the bus station, the only public place I knew, to clean up before going to the house Margaret had told me about. I walked over there—directed by my U.S.O. map of Neosho—with my head held stiffly, trying to keep the wind from mussing my hair.

A boy of high-school age answered the door, and I asked him if they had a room for rent.

"Have we got a room for rent, Mom?" he yelled back

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into the house. His mother called him, and when he came back, he asked:

"Did the U.S.O. send you?" I told him that they had, and he moved the bicycle which partially blocked the door, and invited me in.

His mother, Mrs. Upton, was lying on a bed in the dining room in a housecoat and hairnet, with cold cream on her face.

"Excuse the way I look," she said. "I just got back from work." I could see that her hair was pure black under her hairnet, and her features were handsome and energetic, but beginning to be blurred by lines and excess flesh. She quizzed me about where I came from, how long I wanted the room for, and what my husband's schedule was. I felt more and more as though I were job hunting.

Finally, I figured I had passed the first inspection because she got up, walking as though her feet ached, and led me back into the room.

"It isn't much," she said. "But here it is." The room, in the back of the house across from the kitchen, seemed almost too good to be true. It was light, with an honest-to-God rug on the floor, a closet, dresser, double bed, which sagged only slightly, a card table covered with a fresh cloth, and a private entrance, opening out onto a concrete porch on the side of the house. I told her I thought it was wonderful.

"Oh, it isn't much," she insisted, "but the girls always seem to like it." We sat on the bed, with an ashtray between us and talked it over.

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"The girls here take care of their own rooms, and we all share the bathroom," she said. "It's right next door to this room. You use linen as you want; it's in a cabinet in the bathroom. And it's all live and let live. We're just an ordinary family, an ordinary American family, and we do what we want and let other people do what they want. We won't bother you, and I know you won't bother us." A girl, younger than the boy, and strikingly pretty, appeared in the doorway.

"Mother, is this dress all right to wear to the party?" she asked, after looking me over.

"You know it's all right. Go on away, Patricia," Mrs. Upton said. She pronounced it Patreecia. A small dog came into the room, sliding between the girl's legs.

"I hope you like dogs," Patricia said. I assured her I did, and she disappeared.

"You use your own entrance," Mrs. Upton went on, "and go your own way, and we'll get along fine. The kids make a lot of noise, but we're just ordinary people, and Mr. Upton and I work very hard." I found my mind jumping to follow her transitions, and noticed that her voice carried just the edge of a whine. "I want to do everything I can for you Army wives, and the girls who've lived here have always seemed to like it. They still write me, all of them, every girl that's ever lived in this house still writes me."

Patricia appeared in the doorway again, just to look this time.

"Go on about your business, Pat," Mrs. Upton said.

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"You know you're just showing off." There was a hearty yell from the next room.

"That's Ralph, my son," Mrs. Upton told me. "He's just showing off, too. My third one, Shirley, isn't here now. Shirley's my baby," she added, using the affectionate words matter-of-factly.

She asked me how long I had been in Neosho, and what I thought of it. I said I hadn't seen much except the square and a few of the residential streets.

"You've seen it all," she said. "All there is to see. That's Neosho, the whole town. We aren't natives, of course," she added emphatically. "We come from St. Louis. But Mr. Upton is in business down here."

"Oh, it's a terrible mess, this town," she exclaimed. "All these soldiers. I'm afraid for Patricia and Shirley. I really am. I tell you I'm afraid to let them go out in the streets at night." I shook my head sympathetically, wishing that we'd get back to the subject of the room, wondering if all this meant that she was going to take me. She got up and walked over to the doorway, and I followed, ready to admire anything she pointed out. Clotheslines were laced across the porch, and concrete steps led into the obviously untended part of the yard.

"Now you see those are your steps," she said. I looked obediently at the steps and noticed a worn-out broom leaning against the pipe balustrade.

"Did the U.S.O. tell you what I charge?" she asked. They hadn't, and she went on. "Well, I charge eight a week. I could get thirteen with this private entrance, thirteen dollars, but I wouldn't want to take it from the

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girls." I didn't know then how often I was to hear about that thirteen dollars she could get. I came to wonder if there was some kind of chart where "private entrance equals thirteen dollars" was listed.

"Well," I said, trying not to sound too eager. "I'd like to take it, if it's all right."

"Yes, it's all right," she said. "You'll find we're just ordinary people. When will you move in?"

I explained that my baggage was up in Joplin, and that I'd move down tomorrow, "if that's all right with you."

"Sure, any time, any time," Mrs. Upton assured me. "I don't give kitchen privileges, you understand. I'd like to because I know it's hard for you girls, but I just don't want to make any more bother for the girl who works for me. Of course, as for coffee in the morning, that's all right, and if you want to keep milk or beer in the icebox, well, that's all right, too. But no cooking, because though I'd like to help you out, I just can't have it."

Her ground rules sounded pleasantly lax, and I accepted them gratefully.

"Would you like me to pay you now?" I asked.

"Oh, now, any time, it doesn't matter," she said. I gave her the money, anxious to get it into her hands and have the deal closed. "We'll count this as of tomorrow," she said, fingering the bills expertly.

"Are you going to live here?" Patricia asked, this time all the way in the room.

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"Yes, she is," Mrs. Upton said. "Though what business it is of yours, I can't imagine."

"That's swell," Patricia said.

Ten minutes later, I went out of my own door, locked it after me with my own key, and walked down my own porch steps. I set off for the bus station where I was to meet Spencer, looking over the town with the newly possessive eye of a resident. I felt as though I had won a major victory.



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MY FIRST COUPLE of days in Neosho convinced me that I had to have a job. I was determined not to fiddle away my days flipping through magazines in the palatial new U.S.O. club or lingering over cokes in the drug-stores as most of the Army wives in town did. Fresh from a war job in Washington, the idleness seemed immoral as well as boring.

Starting at the places I most wanted to work, I made the rounds of the local newspapers and radio stations and was politely turned down when I said that my husband was stationed at the camp. Even pretending that he was part of the permanent cadre and teaching in one of the post schools didn't help.

"All you girls say your husbands are cadre," the managing editor of the *Joplin Globe* said, not unpleas-

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antly. "There can't be that many cadremen at Crowder. No, you girls aren't very good risks from the hiring end."

My second choice was defense work, and I went to the local United States Employment Service office to find out what was available. I had written a lot about this organization while working for the Office of War Information in Washington. What I had written had mostly been built around such slogans as "Apply to your nearest U.S.E.S.," or "The right person in the right war job." Convinced by my own propaganda, I walked into the employment office, hoping to get a job on the production line in some war plant, where I could take my proper place as "the woman behind the man behind the gun."

It was noon and only one person was in the spacious, well-lighted office.

"I want to get some information about defense work," I said. "Are there any war plants around here?"

The man, who was elderly and somehow a part of the chair and desk he sat at, handed me a blank. I could see his bald head, shining through side hair carefully combed over it.

"Fill this out," he said.

"But are there any defense plants here?"

"Yes," he said. "There's one. If you'll just fill this out."

"Could you tell me something about the work?" I asked. He looked at me curiously, and shoved the blank at me again.

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"Fill this out, and we'll try to place you." He was obviously bored with the whole process.

"I'd like to find out something about the work available before I fill out an application," I said, speaking very precisely.

"Lady," he said slowly, "just fill out this blank. That's all you have to do." He spoke as though repeating an order to a very dull-witted dog.

"But what kind of work is it? What are the hours? Do they have any openings? What is the pay?"

It was impossible to puncture his routine.

"You can sit over there," he said, pointing to a desk. "Just take this blank, and answer the questions, and give it back to me. Then we'll let you know when something turns up."

"I would like to know what kind of a plant it is," I said, unable to hide my exasperation. "I won't fill out any blank without knowing what I'm filling it out for."

"I'm not allowed to tell you where the defense plant is," the man said sullenly. "I'm a government worker. I can't tell you that." He tried again. "Now just fill out this blank . . ."

"But I didn't ask where the plant is. I don't give a damn where it is."

He rustled the blank impatiently in front of me. I refused to look at it, swallowed hard, and decided to try again.

"Will you tell me something about the kind of work?" I asked.

"No," the man said, almost pettishly. "You're just

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supposed to fill out this blank. That's the regular procedure." I gave it up altogether.

"Well, can you tell me something about the U.S. Crop Corps? Do they need workers around here?" The Crop Corps had been the last campaign I had worked on for OWI before I left. "Food is as important as ammunition." "Volunteer your services to help farmers meet their record production goals."

The clerk looked blank.

"You know," I explained. "The land army, to help farmers get in their crops. Is there a farm labor shortage here?" I remembered precisely the last time I had urged housewives to register with the U.S.E.S. for the Crop Corps.

"I don't know anything about it," he said, defensively, slumping deeper into his chair.

"But the U.S.E.S. is handling it," I insisted. "People are supposed to register with the U.S.E.S."

"Not here, we don't have anything to do with it," he muttered. "Must be somewhere else, some agriculture place. I've never heard of it."

That seemed to settle it. He sat up again, picked up a blank, and held it out to me.

"Now," he said, once more the civil servant, "if you'll just fill this out, just write clearly. Then give it back to me and . . ."

I took the blank, rapidly tore it to bits, and stalked out of the office. I felt like apologizing personally to every person who had ever read my appeals to go to the U.S.E.S.

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The girl I sat next to on the bus going back home was too ecstatically happy to ignore, and my anger melted away as I talked to her.

"See this box," she said, running her hand over a large dress-box she held in her lap. "It's my wedding dress. I'm going to be married this afternoon."

It was already three o'clock, and the wedding was to take place at four in one of the chapels at Camp Crowder, she said.

"You know, Bill's company commander is going to come to the wedding, and he's given the whole company the afternoon off. Gosh, how will I ever get ready in time? I feel so dirty." She had been riding on buses for two days, but she was very gay. "I hope there's a bathtub where Bill got me a room."

"Is he getting any time off?" I asked.

"Until reveille tomorrow morning," she said.

"Are you going to stay here after you are married?"

"As long as my money holds out," she said. "Then I'll go back to my job in the shoe store at home, and save up some more."

"Why not get a job here?"

"Oh, I couldn't get anything decent, and anyway, Bill doesn't want me to work." It sounded inconsistent, but she was obviously proud of his protectiveness. I told her that I was in the process of job hunting.

"Have you tried out at the Post?" she asked. "Bill tells me that lots of wives work out there. Of course, most of the work is Civil Service, and you have to sign a paper swearing to stay for six months, but there are

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some other jobs, working at the PXs and things like that." She seemed pretty thoroughly prepared for life as a Crowder wife. I asked her how she knew so much about it.

"Oh, Bill's been here for ages, and he writes every day," she explained. "He couldn't just write love letters all the time."

I wished her happiness when we got off the bus, and went into the bus station to get a schedule. When I came out she was standing in the middle of the pavement, her dress-box in her arms, and her luggage spread in a semi-circle around her.

"Can I give you a hand?" I asked.

"Oh, no, thanks," she said. "I was just kind of hoping that Bill would turn up, but I guess he couldn't get off." She stopped to glance at a soldier hurrying out of the bus station, but it wasn't Bill. "I hope he comes in time," she said. "I don't know where to go out at camp. Guess I might as well go to my room."

I went out to the camp myself that afternoon—for a much less exciting reason—and got my first taste of Army procedure, my first glance at an Army camp.

We had to get off the bus at the gate, secure little white trip passes from the MPs on duty, and catch the next bus going in—twenty minutes later. A girl carrying a baby waited for the bus with me. She was going to visit her husband at the hospital where, she told me, he was recuperating from Camp Crowder croup. This ailment, officially diagnosed as nasal pharyngitis, affects all Crowder soldiers more or less constantly. According

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to rumor, the victims have to have temperatures well over 100 before they can be admitted to the hospital. The young mother was carrying a satchel of diapers, and one MP discarded his military bearing to hold it for her, while the other googled at the baby.

The long straight highway into camp ran over absolutely flat country, and I remembered Spencer's description of it. "They say this is the foothills of the Ozarks," he had written, "but it's the flattest damn country I've ever seen." We passed the regimental commanders' houses, miniature suburban villas, cut to a G.I. pattern. We passed an obstacle course, and trucks driven by Wacs. Finally the bus driver pointed out the Civilian Employment office, and let me off.

It was a square, dreary building, with a rail cutting off visitors from workers. The girls who worked behind the railing looked like the secretaries in any Washington office, except that they wore ankle socks, had more room to move around it, and didn't seem to have any work to do. Soldiers, mostly officers, streamed in and out, stopping to get cokes out of the coke machine.

There was an information desk behind the railing, but no one was there. When I finally got the attention of one of the girls, she told me that the head of civilian employment wasn't there that day, but the information attendant could answer my questions.

"She's gone out somewhere," the girl said vaguely, "but she'll probably be right back." I sat down and waited, talking to a nervous girl, nineteen years old, who

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was applying for her first job. She was overdressed, over-made-up, and highly scornful of Neosho, her home town.

We waited for three quarters of an hour before the information girl came back, carrying a coke, and wiping doughnut crumbs off her mouth.

She was stocky and short, and wore a blue uniform, with a "Camp Crowder Service Command" insignia on her shoulder. Keeping the straw in her coke bottle between her lips, she looked up when I came over to the rail.

"I'd like to find out about jobs on the Post," I said.

"Our only openings are in the camp laundries," she told me, releasing the straw only long enough to speak.

"What kind of jobs are there in the laundries?"

"Straight laundry work," she said. "Washing clothes. Folding shirts. Ironing."

"Nothing else?" I asked.

She looked me up and down. "No," she said. "Nothing else." I have seldom disliked a girl so quickly and thoroughly. I thanked her, and walked out to wait for the bus home, thinking that getting a war job in Neosho demanded more humility than I possessed.

Two Gray Ladies in a car pulled up at the bus stop and asked me and a sergeant loaded down with a bundle of groceries if we would like a ride into Neosho. They had just finished a shift at the hospital, they said.

Sitting in the back of the car with me, the sergeant asked what I was doing out at camp. I told him I had been to the Civilian Employment Agency.

"Get a job?" he asked.

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"No, they don't have anything but laundry work and I didn't want that."

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed. "Why, they hire girls every day for all kinds of work." He asked me who I had talked to. "Oh, that fathead," he said when I described her. "She's too big for her buttons." The Gray Ladies tittered in the front seat. He seemed to know all about the office, and I asked him if he had been at Crowder long.

"Sixteen months," he said. "And they've been mighty long months. But I've got a furlough now. Ten whole days."

"Do you live around here?" I asked, wondering about the groceries.

"My wife lives in Joplin, and I bring home stuff from the commissary. Food's cheaper out here," he explained.

He told me he was going home for his furlough, "Out to California, by thumb," he said.

"Is your wife going with you?" I asked.

"No, she's not going. See, she's a Joplin girl, and she's kind of used to it here." It sounded like a convenient arrangement.

We drove into town down a street of new-looking houses. "This is what we call 'mortgage row'," one of the ladies told us, as though pointing out the sights. We drove past the U.S.O. club, and I asked them to let me off there.

I had a couple of hours before I expected Spencer, and

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having heard that the U.S.O. had an employment service, I decided to try it.

The woman who ran it spoke softly and neatly, and had an immobile face that was rather chilling. I wondered momentarily how these social welfare agencies picked their employees.

However, she didn't quiver at the thought of my being a soldier's wife, and she seemed to think there were jobs to be had in Neosho.

"Most of it, of course," she said, "is night work. That is when all the stores need help because of the soldier trade." She tended to reduce things to one syllable.

I said I didn't see any point in taking a night job as the evening was the only time my husband got in from camp.

"Do any of the wives take night work?" I asked curiously.

"Some of them have no choice," she said.

"What do their husbands do?"

"Oh, they come and sit in the stores and restaurants and chat when the girls aren't busy," she explained. We saw many such couples later—the husbands sitting in restaurant booths sipping a cup of coffee, watching their wives hover over the late customers; a soldier perched at a sewing machine in a cleaning shop while his wife passed clothes back and forth across the counter to other soldiers.

The woman asked me questions and recorded the answers on a blank.

"Name, please?"

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I told her.

"Educational experience?" Before I could answer, she translated the question. "That is, how many years of high school have you had?" Her manner made me wish I had a Phi Beta Kappa key that I could twirl in her face. I told her I had finished high school, and also college, and immediately resented her new interest in me.

She did have some suggestions: looking after officers' children, which I said I'd like to do; doing housework, which I wasn't too keen on; and working at the Pet Milk Company on the edge of town. (I tried that the next day, but the office manager told me he wasn't interested in "transients.")

She said she'd let me know if anything more definite turned up, and I left, my determination to work rapidly fading. When I knew the U.S.O. officials better some weeks later, I asked one of them how this woman who ran the employment agency—a soldier's wife like the rest of us—had been picked for the job.

"Oh, well, she has such good qualifications," the worker explained. "She's a college graduate." I decided I had underestimated college.

It was after a week and a half of desultory job hunting that I decided to settle for volunteer work. I registered for a nurses' aide course, which "will get under way any day now," the Red Cross woman told me confidently. The course was still about to get under way six weeks later. I volunteered to work at the reception desk of the U.S.O. club two hours every afternoon—

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which involved asking soldiers and their wives to sign their names in the guest book—and registered as a junior hostess—which involved nothing at all—I found out later. And I went twice a week to make surgical dressings for the Red Cross.

It seemed like incredibly little to be putting into the war effort. At first I hated myself for being content, and I was amazed that the days passed so quickly. I still winced when I heard a soldier's wife say: "Oh, I'm doing my share. Gosh, I've given my husband, haven't I?" But I couldn't argue any more, because I, too, had become one of the fiddlers.

- IV -

DOMESTIC DIFFICULTIES

MARGARET LEWIS, head of the Travelers Aid Bureau in Neosho, told me one day that helping Army wives find rooms was only part of her housing job.

"And not always the hardest part, either," she said. "There's also the problem of reconciling landladies and boarders who don't get along." I laughed at the thought of Margaret playing professional peacemaker, but it wasn't long before I could have used a mediator myself. I, however, was not living with Neoshoans, and my case was not the typical one of friction over the bathroom, ironing board, or rent.

The Upton family had been in Neosho eight months when I came to live with them. They had come to collect their share of the excess cash jangling in soldiers' pockets. Mr. Upton owned a military store, and Mrs.

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Upton worked in a rival one. They considered Neosho a hick town, and their way of living there "camping out." But military stores in camp towns are gold mines, and with constant talk of how they'd like to get back to civilization, they stayed on and flourished behind their cash registers.

At home the family was a matriarchy. I suppose Mr. Upton ruled supreme in his store, but to his family he was just someone to settle problems that Mrs. Upton wanted no part of, and to run errands. The three children, Ralph and Patricia and Shirley were bright, cocky, attractive and perfectly aware that their mother was the boss. Another Army wife, Mary Green, lived with them, did the cooking and housework, and was, Mrs. Upton told me when I rented the room, "just like a member of the family."

When I brought Spencer in to meet them the first night I spent there, we came in on a cozy family scene—almost the only cozy family scene I ever saw at their house. Mrs. Upton, in her eternal hairnet, was manicuring Mr. Upton's fingernails. The children were watching, diving frequently into a large pan of popcorn which sat on the middle of the table. Mary was sitting by the radio, sewing buttons on a skirt.

They were friendly and noisy and made us feel very much at home. After brief amenities, we retired to our room, our hands greasy from the popcorn they had given us.

"How does the girl who was sewing fit into the pic-

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ture?" Spencer asked when we were settled behind our closed door.

"She's another Army wife," I explained. "She works for them."

"At nine-thirty at night, she works for them?" Spence exclaimed.

"Oh, that's probably her own skirt she was sewing," I said.

We were too absorbed in being together in our own room to discuss the Uptons more that night. I saw Spence off on the ten o'clock bus, and I didn't even feel sad when I saw him take his place among the G.I.s to ride back to camp. I stood outside the window he was sitting by and chatted with him till the bus pulled out, feeling gay and permanent, and knowing he would be back the next evening, and that I would be there in our new room waiting for him. It isn't much to see your husband two hours a day, but after not seeing him at all, it seemed pretty wonderful.

I learned more about Mary Green the next day. She had been working for the Uptons for three months, but her husband had been shipped shortly before I came, and she was now waiting to hear where he was so she could join him at his new post.

I gathered in the next few days how indispensable Mary was to the family. Mrs. Upton was dreading the day she would go.

"I do wish I could get Mary to stay," she confided to me one day. "Of course, I'd never say this to her, but I just know her husband has been sent to an embarka-

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tion point. She'd really be better off staying right here."

"Well, if he is being sent across," I said, "she'd certainly want to see him before he went, I should think." I found myself using a special unpositive tone in disagreeing with Mrs. Upton, trying very hard not to antagonize her. I was acutely aware that in this room-shortage area, my eight dollars meant less to her than her room did to me.

"Yes, I know," Mrs. Upton said. "But she's better off here. We've tried to do a lot for Mary, and I think she appreciates it. We've given her a home, and she's just like a member of the family. I hate to think of her running off to a strange city for just a few days or weeks before her husband is shipped out. She'd really do better to stay right here."

"Of course, it'll be tough," I said mildly. "But it'd be terrible for her husband to go across without seeing her."

"Yes, I know it would," Mrs. Upton said. "And that's why I'd never dream of saying anything to her about staying. But I'll tell you something very confidentially, and of course I'd never want you to tell Mary I told you, but her marriage isn't all it should be." She spoke softly and leaned back and looked at me almost triumphantly. "It's one-sided, that's what it is. Her husband doesn't care for her the way he should." I wondered a little, having heard Mary talk of her husband, and her ten years of married life.

"Of course, I'd never say anything to Mary. I want her to feel perfectly free to go, but she'd be better off

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staying right here, yes, she would." Mrs. Upton always made her points at great length. "She's doing all right here. What other Army wife working in Neosho can clear her expenses? And her husband doesn't really love her, fine girl that she is, too." She leaned over closer. "You know what it is, it's heart-rendering, positively heart-rendering." Mrs. Upton apparently liked this phrase. I heard her use it many times in my brief tenure at her house.

Mrs. Upton didn't think much of Army marriages. I heard her saying repeatedly that such and such a girl didn't really have a happy marriage. I wondered sometimes what she said about our marriage behind our backs. It, too, was probably a heart-rendering failure. I was talking to Spencer about it one night.

"Mrs. Upton apparently doesn't think much of marriage in general," he said. "Or why would Mr. Upton sleep in the dining room while she sleeps in the bedroom?" The household sleeping arrangements were, of course, none of our business, but they never ceased to puzzle us. Mrs. Upton and Patricia had twin beds in the bedroom, Mr. Upton and Ralph slept in a double bed in the dining room, and Mary and Shirley occupied cots at opposite ends of the living room. Mary explained to me that she and her husband had had my room for a while before I came.

"But it was too expensive for us," she said. "You see, she charges eight a week for the room, and she pays me four a week plus the bed in the living room and meals,

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so when we had the private room I ended up paying her four a week."

I was appalled, but Mary was very mild about it. I never heard her complaining.

Mary and I were good friends in a week. We talked a great deal, mostly while I helped her with the dishes or making beds, for Mary seldom stopped working. She was a thin, tired-looking girl who had married at fifteen, and had been working since she was twelve. Often after Spencer left at night we'd go out for a walk, sit in my room over a last cigarette, or eat some ice cream we'd brought in. We established the quick intimacy of Army wives—based on the same deprivations and the same longings.

Nine days after I moved in Mary heard from her husband. He was in New Orleans and still confined to the Post, but she was determined to go to him anyway. She was just finishing the breakfast dishes when the letter came, and without even waiting to empty her dishpan, she went to call Mrs. Upton.

"I heard from Phil, Mrs. Upton," she said. "I think if it's all right with you, I'll plan to leave Thursday noon." It was then Tuesday. "Do you want me to call the U.S.O. for another girl?" Apparently Mrs. Upton didn't, and when she came home that night, she had still done nothing about getting Mary's successor.

Mrs. Upton paused only long enough to put on her hairnet before coming into my room.

"Well, Mary's set to run off," she said, after closing the door and plumping down on the creaky bed. "With-

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out any warning or anything. She got a letter from Phil and she's running right to him. He doesn't seem very anxious to me, waiting all that time to write her, but she's going anyway. I'd keep him waiting a while, if I was her."

With many protestations that Mary must, of course, do what she wanted, Mrs. Upton started a campaign to make her stay.

"Why, Mary, honey," she said. Her sweet voice carried the same edge of a whine that her sour one did. "Why don't you wait till Monday to leave? You know how crowded those Army towns are over the weekends. It'd be terrible to land there on a Friday or Saturday."

"Yes, but Phil could help her look for a room over the weekend," I said. Mrs. Upton ignored me and went on reasoning with Mary.

"I'd just worry so about you if I knew you were landing in New Orleans over a weekend. Of course, you do what you want, but it seems to me it'd be much better to stay until Monday."

"I guess I better leave when I planned," Mary said firmly. "I've already wired Phil." She stuck to it until Wednesday noon. I came into the house after lunch to find her washing up the dishes, and looking thoroughly dejected.

"Did you get down to the station to buy your ticket?" I asked.

"Oh, I guess I better stay over till Monday," she said wearily.

I was shocked. "But you've already wired Phil," I said.

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"I've got so much to do, though. She wants the house all cleaned up, and I've got to finish that playsuit I was making for Patricia, and she gave me five silk blouses to wash today, and she wants me to bake a cake for tonight. I just can't go away and leave things unfinished."

But in spite of Mrs. Upton, Mary left on Thursday as planned. We worked hard to do it. We worked together all that afternoon, and I ironed the blouses after Spence left that night, while she sewed on the playsuit. We hid ourselves in my room, feeling that it was a conspiracy. We were up early in the morning, and the minute the children left for school, and the parents drove off to work, we were hard at work again. I cleaned and polished and scrubbed while Mary went to the hairdresser to get "looking presentable," and bought her tickets. We went down to the station together, and I stood on the platform and watched her train out of sight, feeling a personal share in her happiness.

Mrs. Upton, who got three hours off in the middle of the afternoon, and then worked three hours after supper, came in about four that afternoon, and set about preparing dinner.

"Of course, I've got to get back to the store," she said. "I won't get a chance to eat any of this, but the kids have got to get some food. We'll have to quit buying food in this house and eat out. I just can't run a house and work fourteen hours a day, too."

"Have you got a new girl yet?" I asked.

"No, but I suppose I better call the U.S.O. I certainly wish Mary had given me time to get someone before

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she left, but of course I wouldn't have tried to hold her a minute longer than she wanted to stay. Now, Mary was a nice girl, and don't think I don't know it, but she had her faults. Mary wasn't one to overwork herself. And slow! God, that girl was slow! But I'll have a time getting anyone even as good as she was."

For the next few days I helped the Uptons out. I made beds, and washed dishes and cooked, though Mrs. Upton kept insisting I shouldn't bother.

"There's no reason for you to do it, Bobby," she said. "I'll get it done somehow. After all, I only work fourteen hours a day."

Finally a new girl was hired, and lasted one day. Mrs. Upton came home late that night to find dirty dishes stacked in the sink and fired her outright. The girl was in bed, and I could hear the tongue-lashing Mrs. Upton gave her all the way in my room. Mrs. Upton came back into the kitchen and called me in to see the mess.

"Look at this!" she said. "Just look!" She peered into the stove, under the sink, into the icebox. She found an opened can of pears in there, with half the pears left in it.

"My God," she said, holding it up. "Have you ever known anyone that didn't know better than to leave food in a can?" She went back to talk to the girl carrying the evidence.

"Oh, take off your clothes, Violet, and go back to bed," I heard her say. "I'm not asking you to leave tonight. You haven't any place to go, and I'm not an ogre." Her voice rose sharply, and I could visualize the

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hard face and scornful mouth. "Do stop that crying now," she said, "and go back to bed."

It turned out the next day that neither the dirty dishes nor the pears were Violet's fault. Patricia had gone into the kitchen to make jello after Violet had finished the supper dishes, and hadn't cleaned up.

Mrs. Upton told me about this the next morning, coming into my room, and shutting the door behind her.

"It was Pat that left the mess," she said. "But this girl isn't any good anyway, and I'm going to let her go on and go. Bobby, you just kind of watch that she doesn't take anything, will you? Of course, I just couldn't believe she'd steal, I couldn't believe that of anyone, but you know, you never can tell. You just keep an eye on her, won't you, Bobby?"

This was the first time I became actively aware of Mrs. Upton's spying. I found later that she was spying on me, too. When they finally got a girl who weathered the first storm and stayed, Mrs. Upton started checking with her on what I ate for breakfast every morning, for, by that time, Mrs. Upton had given me permission to buy groceries and have breakfast at home. (Though cooking Sunday morning breakfast for Spencer was still prohibited.) She called each morning and casually asked Mabel, the new girl, what I had eaten.

"She wanted to be sure you didn't touch her new strawberry jam this morning," Mabel said one day. "God, she thinks everyone's out to cheat on her." In

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the same way, much to my disgust, she tried to check with me about Mabel.

It seemed incredible to us that she wouldn't realize that two Army wives living in the same house would compare notes.

I found out one night that, as a matter of fact, she did realize it, and resented it as a plot against her. I had gone into the kitchen to get Spence a glass of milk, and Mrs. Upton was preparing a meat loaf for the next day, "Because Mabel just wouldn't do it right, and I can't have this dollar and ten cents' worth of meat wasted." She was in a sour temper.

"Sometimes I get so mad down at the store it makes me sick," she said. "Why should I do all the work? My boss has four Army wives in there working, and what good are they? Does he ever make them work at night? No. And when they are there all they do is sit down and smoke and laugh among themselves while I wait on the customers."

Spence came to the doorway of the kitchen. She went right on.

"They don't want to work, they don't want to do anything but be with their husbands, and smoke cigarettes. That's all they're good for, sleeping with their husbands and smoking cigarettes."

I could tell by the steady controlled way in which Spence spoke that he was angry.

"It seems quite reasonable to me, Mrs. Upton," he said, "that they wouldn't want to work at night when

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their husbands are off. They came here just to see their husbands, after all."

"If we wanted to spend our time wrapped up in our jobs, we certainly wouldn't have come to Neosho," I added. My anger was not as well controlled as Spencer's.

She turned on me sharply. "Oh, you Army wives always stick together. You and Mabel and all the rest of them. You're always all for each other."

"Why not?" Spence said quickly. "They're all in the same boat, and it's not the easiest life in the world."

"Oh, don't misunderstand me. I know it's tough for the girls here, and I certainly sympathize. Why, you'd never believe how much I've done for the Army wives." We wondered exactly what she had done. "I came to Neosho feeling very sorry for Army wives, but if you could see what I've seen, if you could see the things they've done in this town. They're just no good. They'll cheat you and leave you holding the bag every time. As a group, I'm still sorry for them, but individually, I have no use for any one of them. They're rotten, just plain rotten. There's not a one of them who's good for anything except sleeping with their husbands and smoking cigarettes."

Furious at myself for being upset by this stupid, malicious woman, I retired to my room, shoving Spence his glass of milk, clamping my teeth to keep from crying.

"That's certainly a phony generalization," I heard Spence saying angrily. "Barbara's an Army wife, for instance, and she happens to be good for a great many

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things. And it's not really so abnormal for women to sleep with their husbands." His voice implied that Mrs. Upton wouldn't understand this, in view of her own domestic arrangements, and I was afraid he was going to go too far, but Mrs. Upton backtracked hastily, and the argument cooled.

"Oh, you know I'm not talking about Bobby. I wouldn't talk about your wife that way." Which was true. She wouldn't, of course, talk to our faces that way. "Oh, I don't want you to think I'm an ogre. I'm really a kind person, kinder than you know, and I've done a lot for the Army wives in Neosho, but if you could see what I've seen . . . "

I called Spence into the room, and we shut the door. Spencer was still angry when he left for camp that night.

"Jesus," he said. "I hate to leave you in this place."

The next morning Mrs. Upton apologized.

"I certainly didn't mean to talk that way in front of your husband," she said. "But working fourteen hours a day, and then coming home and trying to run my house, sometimes I just don't know what I'm doing." We let it go at that.

But the spying went on. And, as it was bound to, the situation came to an explosive head.

It was largely my fault, because for the first time since I had been living with the Uptons, I cheated on our agreement that I wasn't to use the kitchen. The Uptons were going to visit relatives in another town over Easter, and from our room, I heard them get up early on Easter morning, eat a noisy breakfast in the kitchen,

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and drive away in their car. Relieved that their racket hadn't waked Spence on the one day he had a chance to sleep late, I rolled over and went back to sleep when the house was quiet again.

When I woke about noon, I realized that we weren't going to be able to get breakfast in any of Neosho's mediocre restaurants because it was too late. One other Sunday when we had tried to get breakfast after twelve, we had had to settle for soggy, batter-fried chicken, unable to get so much as a glass of orange juice to start off with.

Lying in bed, I saw from our window soldiers and their wives filing in and out of a small grocery store across the street—the kind that is always open—and the temptation was too much. I got up quickly, put on a fresh dress, kissed my sleeping husband, and went out to buy groceries, spending my accumulated points lavishly.

So that the kitchen would look neat and pretty, I washed the dishes that the Uptons had left stacked, and then I prepared a veritable breakfast feast for Mabel and her husband and us. When it was all ready, I woke the household, and we sat in the sunny kitchen for two hours, lapping up ham and eggs, coffee and waffles. The boys compared GI stories, and we were all uproariously happy.

Spence and I cleared away the meal, putting our leftover butter in with the Uptons', pouring the remnants of our syrup into their syrup bottle. We cleaned the kitchen carefully, right down to scrubbing the floor,

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while Mabel and Tom made the beds. Then with all doors and windows open and sun streaming into the room, the four of us lounged in the living room, smoking and talking. None of us felt guilty. The sun was too bright, our one day of complete freedom was too precious, and we were having a real Easter.

Mrs. Upton came back that night suspicious, as though the picture of us at large in her house had been grating on her nerves all day. Pretending to joke, she tried to dig information out of us both.

She grilled Mabel more frankly the next morning, after searching the icebox and counting the oranges. Mabel would never have told on me, but fearing it would become unpleasant for her, I went down to the store where Mrs. Upton worked the next morning to have it out, and incidentally to pay the rent, due that day.

But to my surprise she refused the money.

"I didn't want to tell you myself, Bobby," she said smiling sweetly. "Mr. Upton was going to tell you, but we've decided we need that room for ourselves. It's just too uncomfortable for Mr. Upton sleeping in the dining room, and he wants a room to himself. Of course, take your time about moving. You can stay until you find another place, of course. I hope you understand, dear. We've enjoyed having you and all, but it's just too inconvenient for Mr. Upton."

"Certainly," I said, aware that I was standing very straight. "I'd like to get this business about Easter

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straight, though," I said, "before I go. I want to tell you myself what happened."

"I don't want to hear anything about it," Mrs. Upton said sharply. "I don't care at all. It doesn't matter what happened. I just don't want to discuss it."

In spite of her protests, I told her exactly what we had eaten, where and when. She shook her head vigorously as I talked, and kept saying, "I really don't want to discuss it."

I talked quite stuffily, I realize now, about honesty and fairness and my opinion of the way she had treated Mary and Violet and the way she was treating Mabel. Remembering all her pious hypocrisies I told her what I thought of people who flocked into Neosho to make money off the soldiers as she and her husband had done, and then criticized the town and the soldiers' wives who certainly had as much right there as she did. I had, as a matter of fact, a wonderful time, and talked about a lot of things that were none of my business.

She stopped me as I turned to go.

"I'd just like to tell you, Bobby," she said, "that I've gotten a good picture of your character, of the kind of a girl you really are to come in here and make a scene at my place of business like this. And I'm sure you'll be happier living somewhere else." She was being elaborately self-righteous and proper. "I won't pretend that you haven't hurt me, Bobby, and I'm sorry that you're leaving with such a low opinion of me, but someday, when you're as old as I am, you'll realize that I'm not an ogre."

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I walked home, my head buzzing with the things I hadn't thought fast enough to say. I was disappointed that I hadn't walked out of her house before she had turned me out, but I felt exhilarated and happy.

It was about an hour before reaction set in and I realized I was due to sleep in Neosho's one park if I didn't find myself a room. I explained the situation to Margaret Lewis at the Travelers Aid and she gave me an address.

"This lady's just been remodeling her house," she said. "Why don't you run over there and see if her rooms are all taken yet?"

The house was on a quiet residential street, and two painters were putting finishing touches on the remodeling job. There was a vacant room, and standing among ladders and piles of furniture my new landlady and I settled the details. I moved in three days later, and learned how thoroughly pleasant boarding in Neosho can be.

Two days after I left the Uptons, Mabel called to tell me that the room I had lived in had been rented again.

"You mean Mr. Upton never got a chance at the room at all?" I asked.

"Oh, they talked about it," Mabel said. "But, after all, eight bucks is eight bucks, and Mr. Upton doesn't pay rent."

Mabel, I thought, knew more about the family in two weeks than I had learned in four.

- V -

THE U.S.O. CLUB

ONE DAY when I was playing receptionist—or hostess as the officials preferred to call it—at the desk of Neo-sho's U.S.O. club, I saw a soldier come up the steps to the building, stick his head in the door, and retreat quickly. I watched him back up, study the large, red, white and blue U.S.O. sign above the door, and come in again.

Aware that I had witnessed the maneuver, he explained his uncertainty when he stopped at my desk to sign the register.

"You know," he said, "when I saw all these girls in here, I thought I must be in the wrong place."

I understood the soldier's confusion, for I had had the same reaction when I first came into the building. U.S.O. clubs, as I had always understood their function,

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were places where servicemen could write letters, relax, entertain themselves and be entertained. Not until I came to Neosho did I know about the second function of the clubs—as a daytime haven for servicemen's wives.

All day long, girls climbed the steep hill to Neosho's magnificent U.S.O. club, panting up the last of the broad concrete steps, stopping to register at the desk (an FBI regulation, club officials confided to a few of us habitués) and fanned out through the building. We didn't jam the rooms as the soldiers did at night, but we used every facility constantly. By the time my daily shift at the reception desk started at five o'clock, the little meter that recorded the number of people entering the building usually read about 200, few of whom by that time of day had been soldiers.

The club, as the officials reminded us, was our home, and we used the large sprawling building as just that. There was nothing institutional about the rooms, with the exception of a neon sign over the snack bar. The main lounge had a large fireplace at one end, and tall sunny windows at the other. Pine-paneled walls, carpeted floors and attractive furniture made it a handsome room. The wives gathered to talk on the couches and chairs, which were conveniently grouped for privacy. Some girl was usually picking at the piano at the far end of the lounge, undaunted by any conflict with the juke box or victrola in the music room. The club's check room was manned by a club employee at night, but during the day it was unattended, and wives ran in and out of it, using it freely as a closet.

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In the library at the left of the main lounge, the girls read magazines and books—but mostly magazines picked up casually from the long bench where they were spread out—wrote letters and collected in corners to talk. No rules of silence were enforced, though the peaceful sunny room was usually fairly quiet.

To the right of the lounge was the music room, no doubt designed originally for serious music lovers, but used during the daytime for the inevitable bridge game, as unending as the crap games in the soldiers' barracks at Camp Crowder. The players shifted during the day; when one girl drifted off, another with time to kill took her place. Kibitzers kept up the morale of the players by feeding the combination radio-victrola—a gift from Glenn Miller according to its impressive metal plaque, and, incidentally, an exceedingly wheezy machine. Through the constant music, the thin plunking of ping-pong balls could usually be heard from the vast gymnasium-like ballroom, where the more energetic among us were using the ping-pong tables.

The club also provided us with a good many strictly utilitarian facilities, which were, in our transient lives, invaluable to us. A sewing machine and an ironing board were set up on the stage at the far end of the ballroom, and were taken down only on dance nights to make room for the orchestra. Wives who had never before sewed anything but buttons turned their hands to dressmaking to give themselves something constructive to do and to help stretch their greatly reduced incomes. Girls came in wearing and carrying the clothes

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they wanted to press, unable to afford Neosho's slow and expensive laundries, and not allowed to use the facilities where they lived.

The shiny white ladies' washroom was used for more than the casual cleaning-up that it had been built for. One morning, for instance, I found a girl there brushing her teeth, with a whole toilet kit spread out on the window sill beside her. She explained that the bathroom where she lived "was just too dirty."

"I got a can of Bon Ami and a brush and scrubbed my room when I moved in," she said, "but gosh, I just couldn't cope with that bathroom." She shook a vitamin pill out of the bottle, swallowed it, carefully repacked her kit, and left the washroom. I saw her later at the snack bar eating a breakfast of coffee and doughnuts.

And it wasn't only because of fastidiousness that Army wives patronized the washroom. One day I met a short, stocky, hardfaced redhead in there, stripped to the waist, calmly washing her arms and shoulders.

I had seen the girl around before, and we started the inevitable conversation about living conditions.

"This is what I call a bath in Neosho," she said. "I haven't had a real one in seven weeks."

"No bathtub where you live?" I asked.

"Bathtub, hell, there isn't even any hot water." She was sitting on a stool washing her feet when I left the room.

Before I left Neosho, the club officials, recognizing that cleanliness was as much a problem for some of us as entertainment, thoughtfully excluded the soldiers

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from the shower room in the basement for two hours every morning, leaving it free for the wives. The girls who lived in unequipped homes, met regularly there in the morning, grateful and unembarrassed to use the clean public room with its modern, swift showers.

The club was living, eating, recreation and information center for us. There we received messages, for many of the houses we lived in had no phones or we weren't allowed to use them. And club officials were tireless in tracking us down to report that our husbands had called, or a friend had left a message. Many girls who lived on the outskirts of town met their husbands there at night to save the men a long hike. And there we got our money, since the banks in town wouldn't cash our out-of-town checks. Without the club's apparently limitless exchequer, we would have had an almost insurmountable problem in getting the cash to pay our weekly room rents.

When girls were on the room hunt—as most of us were most of the time—they made a point of spending at least a couple of hours a day at the club, asking friends if they knew of rooms, pouncing on girls who admitted that their husbands were about to be shipped. We made up a peculiarly frank, intimate and changing society. We talked to other girls about everything, seeing each other almost daily, seldom knowing each other's names. When a girl hadn't been seen at the club for several days, it was assumed that she was gone, and with the exception of one or two close friends, the re-

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maining clan of wives was interested only in the room she had vacated.

I suppose U.S.O. policy favored this daytime influx of females, for the building was certainly laid open to us, but among the club officials there was varying opinion. We were strongly defended, brooded over and mothered by a succession of YWCA program planners, but the director of the club itself told me (and all the other girls he knew fairly well) that the Army wives frankly were a bother.

"All the time we have to keep the building open for these girls," he confided to me one day, while unpacking a case of Hershey almond bars in the kitchen behind the snack bar. "They're here at nine in the morning, and they'd be here earlier if we opened any earlier. If it was just for the soldiers we wouldn't have to open till the middle of the afternoon. And you know, they're noisier and messier than the men." He shook his square head morosely, and walked over to a cabinet to stow away the candy. With his powerful, slightly jaunty gait, the director always reminded me of a middle-aged sailor rather than a former minister. "It doesn't seem right to me," he went on. "Why, I wouldn't have to be here until two or three if it wasn't for these girls, but as it is, you know what my hours are? I was here at ten this morning and I have to close up at eleven tonight."

It was true that he worked long and hard at the club, but neither his secretary nor the personnel of the other organizations which make up the U.S.O. believed it was altogether necessary. The director—his stocky figure

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very upright in the gray slack suit he wore as persistently as a uniform—could be, and often was, a genial host to the soldiers and girls who came to the club, but he was the kind of executive who felt his presence always necessary, and his final word in every decision imperative. Throughout the day he did business with plumbers and salesmen, and conducted local dignitaries around the premises. He trusted nothing to his co-workers, who he once told me were “an irresponsible bunch of spinster women.”

He didn't like a lot of us girls much better, and a few he branded as “downright trash.” Stopping at the reception desk one day, he told me that “some of these girls aren't much better than the professional street-walkers who came up here last night.” To avoid another lecture on Army wives, I asked him about the prostitutes. With considerable pleasure, he explained the wily way in which he had ejected them without attracting attention.

“How could you tell that the girls were prostitutes?” I asked.

“Ha!” he exclaimed in disgust. “That's easy. After seventeen years in social work, I can spot 'em every time.” On the whole we liked the director, but we baited him without his realizing it, and laughed at him for the fussy egotist we knew him to be.

Few of the soldiers knew him as well as we did, but they tended to laugh at him, too. I introduced Spencer to him one night, and with a convincing show of seri-

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ousness, my husband asked, "Is it proper for soldiers to salute you?"

The director put his hand on Spencer's shoulder paternally.

"Well, my boy," he said. "Of course they're supposed to, but I try to discourage it. I don't want the boys standing on ceremony with me. On the Post, maybe, but certainly not around here. No, I try to make the boys feel they don't have to do any of that stuff with me."

"That's a fine way to look at it," Spencer said, still playing it perfectly straight-faced.

A few of the soldiers, however, didn't think the director was merely funny. There were rumors around for weeks that a petition had been signed at camp asking for his removal. Nothing was done about it, but open resentment was often expressed on the dance floor, for instance, when he stopped the orchestra to make an announcement—a process always accompanied by jokes and overwhelming good fellowship. Soldiers got impatient, and muttered while the director managed to take five minutes in asking us to give the band a big hand.

But at the same time, I think the majority of the soldiers realized what we wives did: that the club under this man's direction was an extremely hospitable and friendly place where they could have a good time, unhampered by institutional or Army regulations. If a soldier got rowdy—which seldom happened—the direc-

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tor dealt with him himself, never, as far as I know, resorting to calling in the MPs, which he was empowered to do.

“I don’t want MPs around here,” he told me once. “There’s no point in having a club if the boys can’t use it to forget the Army.” Basically, he had the right idea.

- VI -

WE GIRLS

WHEN I FIRST CAME to Neosho, the U.S.O. club—open for only three months at that time—already had a program planned for the Army wives. In another three months, this program had mushroomed into a round-the-clock schedule of events.

This multiplication was due, it was generally conceded, to the appointment of two new YWCA workers to the club. One of the women, Miss Gretchen Stoakes, was a small energetic brunette, who quickly learned not to allow the director to badger her plans out of existence. The other woman was less aggressive, but with Miss Stoakes leading the charge, the Camp Crowder wives were soon as much the business of the club as the soldiers themselves.

Never very excited about organized women's activities,

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I didn't attend any of the U.S.O.'s clubs and classes for my first few weeks in Neosho. Finally I was dragged to Wives' Club, the central event of the wives' week, by a friend, Pat Jacobs.

Pat was older than most of the Army wives in Neosho. She was a Southern girl who had lived in New York for a long time. Delicate, slim, tall and dark-haired, Pat was friendly, practical and salty.

"Come on," she said, "you've got to go to the thing. The officials will decide you're living in sin if you don't."

The meeting of the Wives' Club was held in the music room, where the victrola had been turned off, the bridge game temporarily disbanded, and all the chairs pushed to the sides of the room to make a wide circle. Pat and I found seats together, persuaded a girl to pass us an ash tray, and settled down to await the proceedings.

When the room was full, Martha Graham, a pleasant, meek girl who was the club's president, stood up and smiled apologetically while waiting for silence.

"Now, girls," she said, when the racket had subsided, "let's introduce ourselves all around for the benefit of the newcomers." The girl at her right called out her name, telling where she came from, and the self-introductions swept around the circle, the eyes of the group taking in each cotton dress or pair of slacks as the owner announced herself. Five girls in one corner of the room went through a little act of saying their names in unison.

"Brooklyn," Pat told me in an aside before they stated it.

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Martha Graham laughed politely, and started to say something, but the introductions had traveled on around the circle. The girls giggled at Martha and their own triumph.

"Now we'll have the business meeting, girls," Martha said. "Mrs. Brookhart has something to tell us today. Mrs. Brookhart is in charge of Handicraft Class, as most of you know."

What Mrs. Brookhart had to say was that we should all come to Handicraft Class.

"You don't have to be an artist to make lovely things," she concluded.

"Now, shall we have the hospital committee's report?" Martha said, when Mrs. Brookhart sat down. "As most of you know, a volunteer committee from the Wives' Club visits Army wives in the hospital each week." She looked around the circle for the committee. A small, pretty Southern girl spoke timidly from one corner of the room.

"I guess I was the hospital committee last week," she drawled.

"Will you tell us about it?" Martha prompted.

"Well, I went to the hospital on Saturday," the hospital committee said, "and found that there was only one soldier's wife there. I bought her a potted plant and took it over to her Monday morning, but she had already gone when I got there." The group chortled and the hospital committee blushed. "I know it sounds funny," the girl said, embarrassed, "but what am I going to do with the plant?"

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"Why don't you just keep it?" Martha said kindly. "I'm sure it'll look very pretty in your room. Now, shall we have volunteers for next week?" She strained her voice to be heard above the noise. Volunteering for all the various functions of the Wives' Club was slow, and muttering that someone had to do the jobs, Pat gave both her name and mine for two things—food committee for the Wives' weekly luncheon, and hospital committee.

"I wish I knew what you were signing me up for," I said, grinning at Pat.

"Cooking, honey," she said. "It's fun. I don't know about the hospital committee. I've never been on that, but I'd certainly like a potted plant for my room."

The business meeting dragged along, few girls paying any attention. One girl was sketching on a pad, and from the surreptitious giggles of her neighbors, I assumed she was drawing caricatures. Martha was having a difficult time, and at one point Miss Farnsworth, Miss Stoakes' assistant, stood up and held out her hand for silence.

"Now, girls," she said, including us all in a watery smile, "Let's be a little quieter so we can all hear Martha. With my great big old voice I could shout right over you, but Martha has a little voice, and we have to be quiet to hear her." (Miss Farnsworth, I learned later, had come to the YWCA via a public school, where she had taught the first grade.) Pat shuddered visibly.

"I guess that clears up the business," Martha said

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finally. "And I'm going to turn the meeting over to Miss Farnsworth, who's planned the program for today." Martha sat down, obviously glad to be done with her official duties.

"Well, girls," Miss Farnsworth said, rising and wagging her head coyly at us, "we aren't going to be educational today, we're just going to have a rousing good time. The program for today is a good old-fashioned sing. We'll have to go into the ballroom, girls, to be near the piano, but first let's give Martha a nice big hand."

The clapping was thin, as girls gathered up their purses, and put out their cigarettes. One of the Brooklyn girls trilled up and down the scale with elaborate operatic gestures.

Radiating enthusiasm, Miss Farnsworth bounced ahead into the ballroom, and signaling us to gather around the piano, she passed out song books.

"Now, girls, I know there's lots of talent in this group," she said, "so I expect some fine harmonizing."

Pat and I dutifully cleared our throats, and moved near the outside of the loosely grouped semi-circle, to let the shorter girls get near the piano.

The singing sounded weak in the vast room, many of the girls talking right through the songs, not bothering to face the piano. Pages rustled noisily as girls flipped through their books to find the place.

"Let's have a nice rousing one, now, girls," Miss Farnsworth said brightly, refusing as always to recognize the tepid enthusiasm of the wives. "Something that all

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those nice husbands at camp might be singing at this very moment."

"My nice husband is a complete monotone," Pat observed aside to me. The girls who were singing stood with tight smiles on their faces, waiting for the song to begin. The less cautious loudly whispered remarks to their friends.

When we had finished "I've Been Working on the Railroad," the sing was apparently over, for Miss Farnsworth led us back into the music room. When the hard-working refreshment committee had served iced tea and cookies, the meeting broke up. Going out the door, I heard two of the clique from Brooklyn talking ahead of me.

"Tie up your pigtails, Gertie," one of them said. "Sunday school's over."

"Wives' Club!" the other said, laughing. "It's all I can do to keep from throwing spitballs in there."

"Let's go out and get drunk," the first one said. Laughing together, they went over to the snack bar and bought cokes.

I felt unaccountably depressed by the meeting, but not as scornful as the two Brooklyn girls. Those two, I decided, had had their fill of women's activities.

But to my surprise, they were on hand for the weekly wives' luncheon on Friday, well at the head of the line which formed in front of the serving table. I noticed them frankly appraising the food, and heard them discussing between themselves which of two plates had more cottage cheese on it.

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As Pat had predicted, I enjoyed being on the food committee for the wives' luncheon. It was exciting to buy and plan food, to have a stove and a sink and an icebox to work with. It had been a long time since either of us had had the run of a kitchen.

We met early Friday morning at the Safeway—the town's largest grocery store—to do the marketing for the meal. The third girl on the committee, Dorothy Sutter, was late, and our pushcart was loaded when she got there. We carried our tremendous bags of groceries up the hill and worked hard and attentively for two hours chopping eggs for the salad, washing lettuce, peeling innumerable tomatoes.

We had the dainty sandwiches and substantial salad ready long before the girls arrived to eat them, and we went out on the back porch to smoke a cigarette.

"Why, girls, you're just the most efficient bunch I've ever seen," Miss Farnsworth said, poking her head out the door. "Why, everything looks just lovely."

At twelve o'clock, we set the luncheon plates on a serving table in front of the snack bar, and the wives filed past, led by the Brooklyn girls. They selected their food, and wandered into the ballroom, stopping to pay their twenty-five cents at the door. We had planned for a maximum of fifty, and sixty-three girls came. We scurried around patching together extra servings, passing plates of sandwiches in the ballroom, lugging heavy pitchers of iced tea for refills.

I didn't hear any of the program which followed the luncheon as I was busily engaged in washing dishes.

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(There was supposed to be a special dishwashing committee, but only one member of it turned up.) However, I had a play-by-play description from Pat as she hurried back and forth, bringing the dirty dishes to the kitchen.

"Well, the festivities are starting," she reported, as she arrived with the first tray of glasses. "They're introducing themselves."

We heard the strains of singing for the next little while, with occasional sectional songs, like "The Sidewalks of New York," coming out strong. There was complete silence after that, and I questioned Pat on her next trip.

"What's happening now?"

"A speech," she said. "The town librarian telling about the foundation and growth of Neosho." She shook her head ruefully. "God, the girls look embarrassed to death."

Another speech followed that one, Pat reported, as she dumped a load of silver into the sink.

"Is it good? Who's speaking?" I asked.

"A Mrs. Potter from the Red Cross," Pat said. "I don't know if it's good, but she calls us 'Camp Crowder Wives' instead of 'girls.' It's kind of refreshing."

Pat reported on her next trip that Mrs. Potter was talking about a nurses' aide course which was just about to start, and I made a mental note of it. We finished up the washing, the other girls putting dishes away, while I scrubbed the sink. When we finally joined the party,

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the speeches were over, and the girls were chatting at their tables. Miss Farnsworth beckoned us over.

"It was a lovely luncheon, girls, just lovely," she told us. She stood up and held up her hand.

"I've just been telling these hard-working girls what a lovely luncheon it was," she said, using her great big old voice to quiet the scattered audience in the ball-room. "And I know all you girls will want to tell them how much you enjoyed it, too." I felt distinctly embarrassed by the clapping.

When Miss Farnsworth had shaken hands with the speakers, and called for one last round of applause to thank everyone for everything, the meeting broke up.

(This particular luncheon, I found out later while doing some volunteer typing for the club, had been "a great success." The program following the meal was reported to U.S.O. headquarters as "an outstanding example of bringing the townspeople and the Army wives into a state of closer understanding.")

The next thing on our agenda of volunteer jobs was the hospital committee. Pat and I, unlike the Southern girl the week before, found several sick Army wives—four of them—and we hurried out to buy them presents before they could recover and check out of the hospital.

"All maternity cases," the nurse told us. "Three babies and a mis. The mis. has been having epileptic fits, but she's better now." (It took me a moment to figure out that the nurse meant a miscarriage and not an unmarried mother.)

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We bought three pairs of baby booties, and had them carefully wrapped in the appropriate colors.

It was harder thinking of something for the mis.

"Nothing that will remind her of babies, now," Pat said. Something cheerful and normal." We went to the florist to buy flowers, and settled for the only thing they had, a potted plant.

We hurried back to the hospital and laid the extra gifts on the information desk while making our calls.

"Go and see Mrs. Markowitz last, will you, girls?" the nurse said. "She came out of the delivery room just twenty minutes ago, and she had a hard time."

"Oh, I don't imagine we ought to bother her, should we?" I said nervously. "She must be worn out." I could think of nothing I'd want less under the same circumstances than a couple of strange women making small talk.

"Oh, you can see her all right," the nurse said casually. "They like company."

We went to see the girl who had had the miscarriage first.

"That'll be kind of grim," Pat said. "The others will be easy."

The girl, vague and pale, was trying to sit up when we found her room down at the end of a long badly lighted corridor. There was no one there to help her, and we arranged her pillows for her, and stood uneasily in the cell-like little room, trying to chat normally. The girl's head swayed loosely from side to side as she answered our questions.

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"I'd like to see my little boy," she said. "I've got a little boy two years old. But they won't bring him here. My husband tells me about him, but they won't bring him to see me. My, what a pretty plant! I certainly appreciate it." She rolled her head toward the bare dresser where we had set it. Her thin shoulders and neck showed no muscle structure as she moved. Her breasts, partially showing through the bright pink rayon and lace of her nightgown, were limp and loose.

"Well, we've got some other calls to make," Pat said after a while. "We certainly hope you're up and around soon." She spoke warmly and simply.

"Oh, please stay a little," the girl said quickly. "I enjoy talking to you so much. Stay and have a cigarette with me." She reached for a mashed package, but Pat was quicker.

We lit cigarettes, emptied the girl's overflowing ash tray and stayed to talk. Pat sat on the bed, and I leaned against a wall. Finally, after about half an hour, the girl was obviously tired and we left.

"Christ!" Pat said. "The poor kid!" We walked quickly back to the hospital desk.

One of the three Army mothers was apparently nursing her child, for a nurse told us we couldn't come in. The second one was sitting up in bed, calmly reading a mystery story.

"Gee," she said when we had introduced ourselves, "you girls mustn't let on that I've taken a book from the club. I know they're not supposed to leave the building, but my husband brought this down last night. He

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was sure they wouldn't care if I returned it when I'm well."

We, too, were sure they wouldn't care, and told her so.

Clothed in bulky hospital nightclothes, she appeared to be a sturdy girl, with a rich braid of black hair lying luxuriantly on her pillow. We had no trouble talking to her. She was delighted to tell us all about her baby and her delivery, and her husband's shyness with the child. She seemed strong and cheerful, and we didn't stay very long.

Mrs. Markowitz was lying in complete darkness, and we wouldn't have disturbed her, except that she heard us through the open door, and urged us to turn on the light and come in.

Her hospital nightgown was damp and mussed, and perspiration wet her forehead and cheeks. She looked quite ill and limp with fatigue, but she was shyly happy about her experience, and pleased to see us. She thanked us for the gift, but didn't open it. We noticed a large bunch of wilting peonies thrown carelessly on her bed.

"I thought it might be my husband when I heard you outside the door," she said. Pat said humbly that she wished it had been.

"Oh, no, I didn't mean that," the girl said quickly. "I think it's wonderful of you to come. But you see, when I went into the delivery room, the doctor thought I was going to have a hard time, and he called out to camp for my husband to come in. I guess his C.O. wouldn't let him, though." Her gentleness made me squirm with

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anger at the Army's stupid, needless cruelties. Men could be taken away from their training schools for work details, or to console a grieving dog, but their time couldn't be spared to help a wife in the agony of a dangerous birth.

"My husband told me last night," Mrs. Markowitz went on, "that if I was far away he'd probably get an emergency furlough to come home while I had the baby, but being right here, he said his C.O. would figure that coming in at night as usual would be plenty." I realized that the palms of my hands were sweating, and when I spoke I had to control my voice. It was no time to say what I thought of the Army.

"These are lovely flowers," Pat said softly, picking up the peonies. "Shall I get the nurse to put them in water for you?"

"Thank you," Mrs. Markowitz said. "The lady where I'm living brought them to me. I was still half asleep when she came, and she just put them on the bed, I guess. The nurse is so busy, I hated to bother her."

Pat found an empty pitcher in the next room, filled it with water, and untied the heavy twine that held the blossoms. The flowers looked a little top-heavy in their clumsy vase.

Mrs. Markowitz hadn't seen her child yet, and at her request we tried to get a look at him in the nursery. But the stiffly starched maternity matron said no, and waved us away from the little peephole into the room.

Mrs. Markowitz was the last of the Army wives on our

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calling list, and we left her to sleep and walked out of the hospital.

"I've been in a lot of hospitals," Pat said as we walked down the street. "But never one like that."

"I know," I said. "It's kind of gruesome."

"It's those girls," Pat said. "They're so damned alone. No husbands, no families. Except for Mrs. Markowitz, not even any flowers. It makes me sick at my stomach," she said quietly.

We made the regular hospital committee report to the Wives' Club the next week. We made it brief and somehow meaningless. It fitted perfectly into the whole monotonous procedure.

I went to a few more wives' events with Pat, who seemed to go doggedly to all of them. We attended exercise class one morning, "guaranteed to put weight on you if you're thin, and take it off if you're overweight." The overweights predominated, and when the class was over they flocked to the snack bar to replenish themselves with ice cream. I attended one volunteer hostess meeting, designed to straighten out the working schedule at the reception desk, but so little was accomplished that I didn't go again. I never went to sewing class, or the "Better Halves" weekly ping-pong tournament, or the bowling club, or the class where an "Arthur Murray instructor" was teaching the girls to conga, and I never joined the large group at Handicraft Class.

One day Miss Stoakes called me into her office.

"I hear you wrote that nice little piece for the paper the other day," she said. She was referring to some pub-

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licity I had done for the Travelers Aid. I admitted that I had.

"I thought it was so clever," she said. "I want to ask your advice on a short-story writing class we're thinking of starting. Don't you think that would be fun?"

I felt a brief urge to question the word "fun," not only in connection with writing short stories, but in relation to all the wives' activities to which the club officials applied it. I wanted to ask all the questions that tumbled into my mind. Was providing fun for Army wives what people donated money to the U.S.O. for? Were the girls having fun at the women's activities, and did they want fun? But Miss Stoakes was smiling at me expectantly, and I didn't know how to question the good intentions of this woman who made her living planning things for us to do.

"Has there been much demand for a short-story writing class?" I asked.

"No, no one's suggested it specifically," she said vaguely. "But I'm sure lots of the girls would come." I wanted to shout that we weren't potential juvenile delinquents that must be kept off the streets, that we were women intimately engaged in a war. I wanted to ask her why the club didn't offer us war work to do, why we didn't do more for the lonely girls in the hospital, why some of the energy spent entertaining us couldn't be turned toward organizing us for something useful.

"I should think the wives would eat up something constructive like short-story writing," Miss Stoakes went

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on. "It's such a fine means of expression." The phrase reminded me of a staff meeting at a progressive school or a girls' camp, and I remembered the Brooklyn girls who felt like throwing spitballs. Why didn't we ourselves insist on programs that we could respect, that we needn't jeer at? Why did we encourage the childish activities by going to them? Why did I go? Why did a hundred other grown women go? Why did Pat—sophisticated, sensitive Pat—persist in attending these pointless clubs and classes? I felt suddenly and urgently that I must ask her.

"Don't you think it's a good idea, Bobby?" Miss Stoakes asked, and she sounded almost hurt. I know I blushed, and I mumbled vaguely that I wasn't sure there was enough interest. I was anxious to get away.

"Well, think it over, Bobby," Miss Stoakes said. "We haven't got anything on the schedule for Monday morning, and we've got to think of something." I said that I would and hurriedly excused myself.

"Where's Pat?" I asked the girl at the desk.

"I think she went to Newcomers Club," the girl said, looking up from the letter she was writing. "It'll be over in a few minutes."

In a few minutes Pat came out of the music room and sat down beside me.

"What in the world were you doing at Newcomers Club?" I asked, bluntly. "I thought it was for wives who've just come to town."

"I guess it is," Pat said, stretching languidly. "But I

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never went when I was a newcomer, and I wanted to see if I had missed anything."

"Had you?"

"No," Pat said. She started to say something more, but I couldn't contain my question.

"Look, Pat," I said. "Do you like all these little affairs at the club?"

"I like the girls," Pat said.

"Sure," I persisted, "but do you like the events?"

"Not particularly," Pat said. She wasn't paying much attention to me.

"Why in hell do you go, then?"

Pat realized I was serious.

"I hadn't thought about it much," she said slowly, and considered for a moment. "Have you ever seen my room, Bobby?" she asked suddenly. I said I hadn't.

"Well, it has four walls, and one window and striped yellow wall paper." She laughed self-consciously.

"I sat in there so much at first that the damn wall-paper started getting on my nerves. So now I spend my time up here instead."

Suddenly she grinned.

"I wouldn't say that it was very invigorating," she said. "But it takes up a lot of time. Look at that." She pointed to a clock on the wall. "It's four o'clock. That makes it two hours since I've looked at my watch. Come on, honey," she said. "Stop brooding. Let's go for a walk."

Silently I agreed, and we got up and walked across

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the floor, past the girls writing letters, past a pair playing checkers, past four girls sipping cokes, past the girls at the reception desk. We walked out of the club and down the hill, away from the dozens and dozens of wives waiting patiently for the daytime void to end.

- VII -

IT'S HARD TO BE USEFUL

WIVES' LUNCHEON, the one that was reported to U.S.O. headquarters as bringing the wives into a "state of closer understanding" with the townspeople, led me into the only violent misunderstanding I ever had with native Neoshoans.

I took too literally Mrs. Potter's talk at the luncheon about the need for nurses' aides, and started pursuing again a project I had given up. Back in Washington before I had decided to camp follow, I had wanted to become a nurses' aide, and in Neosho with much more time and idle energy, I had tried to get into a course from the first week I arrived.

Mrs. Potter's statement at the luncheon that the course was just about to begin sent me hurrying home to report to Jane Andrews, a girl living next door, who was equally anxious to do something useful.

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"You mean it's actually going to get started?" Jane said, laying aside the magazine she was reading.

"By Wednesday of next week," I said. "Mrs. Potter wants us to come get our application blanks."

"That's wonderful," Jane said doubtfully. Jane, a quiet, serious and lovely girl from Alabama had reason to feel doubtful. She had been excluded from a nurses' aide course while she and her husband were stationed in Georgia on the grounds that she was an Army wife and therefore too impermanent. And we had both been thoroughly discouraged by what seemed like endless stalling on the part of the Neosho Red Cross.

The first time I went to the local Red Cross office—almost two months before the wives' luncheon—I had been ushered in to see Mrs. Potter after a lengthy wait in a stuffy outer room. She was a smartly dressed, firmly corseted woman whose face, with its heavy attractiveness, gave me the impression of hundreds of weighty secrets that she was being careful not to tell me. Taking me into her confidence for a moment, she revealed that a nurses' aide course was just about to begin, and unbent enough to describe it to me. She told me it was going to be held in Joplin, where we would be transported for classes, and hinted at the rigorous character investigation and physical examination that each applicant would be subject to. She took down my name and address, and said she would get in touch with me "very shortly."

"Just as soon as all the arrangements are completed," she said. I had the feeling that hundreds of well-oiled

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wheels were turning quietly and efficiently in the background.

"Will the course start soon?" I had asked.

"In a couple of weeks," she had said. "We'd like to get started right away, but as the course is being conducted in Joplin, we have to wait until things get under way from their end." I went back to my room, expecting to be called any day.

Puzzled when I had had no word from her in two weeks, I went back to the office, and listened while Mrs. Potter told me that there had been a slight delay, and that "things are almost ready."

"I've got your name and address right here on my desk and it won't be long now, Mrs. Klaw," she had said heartily, as though descending to an idiom that I would understand. "But of course we can't move any faster than Joplin does." She again launched into a description of the course, emphasizing how carefully girls would be chosen for it, and how much she thought I would like it.

"While I'm here," I asked, "I wonder if I could fill out my application blank?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, my dear," she said confidently, "I don't have the blanks yet."

My third trip to the Red Cross office was after another two weeks when I went to report a change of address, wanting to make sure that she could get in touch with me when she wanted to. She thanked me for coming in, and assured me that "arrangements were almost completed."

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About that time I met Jane, and discovered she was also pursuing Mrs. Potter. From then on we alternated our trips of inquiry. During that period we were both given several specific starting dates for the course, which would duly approach and pass without a word from Mrs. Potter. Finally, with considerable disappointment, we had chalked up nurses' aide as one more attempt to do something useful that was never going to come to anything.

So when Mrs. Potter spoke at the wives' luncheon, saying that the course would start in five days, saying it in front of sixty witnesses, and going so far as to request applicants, we were surprised, delighted, and at last convinced.

Not only were the long-absent application blanks waiting for us at the office when we went down to get them, but Mrs. Potter finally seemed to be forging ahead in all directions on the project.

"Now, girls," she told us. "You are to appear before the selection committee this afternoon for your interviews, and then we'll give you instructions for the medical examinations."

Jane and I, freshly bathed and dressed, and ready to face the most arduous grilling about our loyalty to the Constitution and our desire to work tirelessly, found the selection committee a little disappointing. It consisted of one small, fluttery woman who didn't seem to know what to say. She read our application blanks as though she was sure that that, at least, was the right thing to do, chatted with us about the weather and Neosho and

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the war, told us how "cute" the nurses' aide uniforms were, and said Mrs. Potter would be back in a minute.

Mrs. Potter hurried in carrying a stack of papers.

"Here are the blanks for your medical examinations, girls," she said. "Now, how shall we arrange it? Do you have doctors here in town?"

We didn't, and realizing that "arrangements" had by no means "been completed" I asked if perhaps we could go to Dr. Reid, the Public Health doctor for the examinations. It was beginning to be obvious that the well-oiled wheels had jammed.

"That's a good idea," Mrs. Potter said generously. "I'll go talk to him right away." She seemed fired with enthusiasm of getting things done.

Ten minutes later she came back, told us it was all settled and jotted down a schedule of appointments.

"You're to go at nine tomorrow, Mrs. Klaw, and you at nine-thirty, Mrs. Andrews," she said.

Jane and I walked home quite confident that the run-around was over. We visualized that what-to-do problem as satisfactorily taken care of for the next seven weeks, and looked forward to the hard work with eagerness. With a vivid memory of my visit to the sorely understaffed Neosho hospital, I vowed aloud to give a tremendous amount of my time to volunteer nursing, and Janie agreed to match it, hour for hour. We stopped at a five-and-ten-cent store, and bought small efficient note books for note taking in the course.

"I wonder how they're going to get us to Joplin," Jane said, as we walked up the hill toward home.

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"I don't know," I answered. "But Mrs. Potter has assured me that transportation will be arranged." We both laughed at my unconscious imitation of the Potter phraseology.

I have always disliked medical examinations, and the one for nurses' aide—where we were examined mainly for venereal disease—was particularly unpleasant. A plump little nurse and a slightly deaf and somewhat heavy-handed doctor (who kept trying to persuade me to have a smallpox vaccination because he didn't understand me when I said I had had one three months before) made the tests and wrote down the information. Although I disliked the way they compared notes on how I was made, discussing me as a dull but unavoidable case, I admired the thorough businesslike examination they subjected me to.

I was convinced by then that Mrs. Potter's briskness was a disguise for inefficiency, but the Public Health Department seemed to me like a competent if mass-production organization. Jane, however, came away with a different impression.

She was a girl with a pure and somewhat innocent mind, shy and modest, who never let herself be seen with so much as a shoelace untied. In Jane's presence, I am sure, even the most insensitive dolt would have refrained from telling dirty stories. I wasn't, therefore, surprised to find that she had been offended by Dr. Reid's untender investigation of her insides.

"Gosh," she said when she came home, and found me on her front porch waiting for her, "that examina-

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tion gave me the creeps. I've had the same kind before, but that officious little nurse and bored doctor. They made me feel unclean. It's as though they are assuming you're guilty until proved innocent."

"Oh, well," I said casually. "A public health department like that handles so many people, Janie. You can't expect them to be like your own doctor."

"No, but the nurse seemed so kind of careless, and Dr. Reid was so rough." She held out her arm. "Look at that," she said. "He poked me five times with that needle before he could get any blood. I told him where he'd have to put the needle in. I've had that trouble before, but he wouldn't pay any attention."

"He probably didn't hear you," I said soothingly. "He's a little deaf, you know."

"Well, I know he got a bad impression of me," she said. "Because I just couldn't help crying. He was hurting me awfully."

I didn't see why that should make any difference, and told her so, but apparently it did, for when we called Mrs. Potter (we waited all day to get final instructions from her, but none came) she said genially:

"Well, Mrs. Klaw, you all came through with flying colors, with one exception." There was a dramatic pause and she continued in a lower and more intimate voice. "Dr. Reid doesn't want Mrs. Andrews to take the course." As I listened to her talk, I could see that Janie sitting on the couch watching my face, knew that something was wrong. I was acutely distressed. More

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even than myself, Janie had been banking on taking this course.

"Mrs. Andrews is right here," I said. "Would you like to speak to her?"

"Oh, I couldn't discuss it over the telephone," Mrs. Potter said significantly. "If you'll ask her to come down to my office, I'll talk it over with her."

With a quiet, unnatural determination Jane set off for the Red Cross office, and at her request, I went with her.

I sat nervously in the Red Cross anteroom waiting for her to come out of Mrs. Potter's office, half conscious of a conversation going on on the other side of a flimsy, beaverboard partition, between another Red Cross worker and an elderly woman who was upset because her dependency allotment from her soldier son had never arrived. I remember wondering briefly if it was necessary to peer so intimately into the woman's life to help her get her fifty dollars a month.

Jane and Mrs. Potter came out together, and I noticed that Jane was once more relaxed and smiling.

"Well, you do that, Mrs. Andrews," Mrs. Potter was saying, "and let me know how it comes out." Her smiling magnanimity, her whole official figure seemed to tower in width and breadth above and around Janie.

"Mrs. Potter," I said, seeing that everything was genial again. "Where do we meet in the morning?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you girls?" she said. "The course isn't starting till Friday." Seeing myself barely saved

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from a fruitless wait on a street corner at eight in the morning, I said a little coldly:

"No, you hadn't told us."

"Maybe I ought to call the other girls and tell them," Mrs. Potter said, obviously playing with a new idea.

Jane could hardly wait till we got out of the office to tell me what Mrs. Potter had said.

"You know what it was?" she said. "The doctor had decided that I'm emotionally unbalanced or something." In her relief, she was positively giggling. "Come on," she said. "I'm going to go talk to him."

Janie put up a strong case for herself, managing to seem dignified and reserved. Sitting in the outside office, I could hear every word she said. She was, I could tell, determined to make the doctor hear her, as her usual speaking voice was soft and Southern.

I could hear the doctor resist, and then finally change his verdict.

"Well, Mrs. Andrews," he concluded, "your being willing to come here and talk it over so frankly is seventy-five per cent of the battle, and if you really want to take this course, I'll call Mrs. Potter and tell her you have my blessing."

We walked home happily, thinking that it was all settled. Two days passed in this cheerful assumption during which Jane rearranged her volunteer hours at the U.S.O. club so that her mornings would be free for the nurses' aide course, and we both caught up on our laundry. Now that we were confident that nurses' aide was really going to begin, we laughed at the trouble we

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had had and the irritation we had felt in pursuing what seemed to be a receding mirage. We agreed that Mrs. Potter was inefficient, but that her bungling could make no difference when the course got under way. We didn't know then that what we had suffered to date was merely annoying and that Jane had yet to go through an experience which might have been laughable for some people, but was for her almost tragic.

On Thursday morning, the day before the latest starting date for the course, Jane and I were sitting on her front porch reading the paper when a small coupe pulled up in front of her house, and the plump Public Health nurse got out of the car, carrying a brief case like a business man. Jane and I looked at each other inquiringly and watched her come up the path, walking solidly and briskly in her low-heeled shoes.

"Good morning," she said, radiating good health. "I wonder if I could speak to you for a moment, Mrs. Andrews?"

They disappeared into the house, and the moment drew out to twenty minutes. Finally she reappeared without Jane, walked briskly to her car, raced the motor and drove away.

I found Jane sitting on the couch, her face blank.

"What's the story?" I asked.

"There's something wrong with me," she said dully. "I can't take the course."

"Does the doctor still think you're emotionally unbalanced?" I said it lightly, trying to cheer her. Mrs.

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Potter had said we were both in perfect health, so I couldn't think what else it could be.

"No," she said. "It's physical this time." Sitting perfectly limp, with her hands resting in her lap, Jane started to cry. She paid no attention, made no effort to control it. "The nurse says I have gonorrhea." She pronounced the word slowly and strangely, as though she had never spoken it before. It sounded round and sonorous and from her, dreadful.

The story began to spill out. Apparently the clean bills of health that Mrs. Potter had told us about had been premature. The tests had not been completed until that morning.

"I told the nurse it was impossible, Bobby," Jane said desperately. "Utterly impossible. It seemed so impossible it was almost funny at first, and then I began to wonder about public rest rooms and all. I asked her if I could get it that way, and she said it was 'very unusual.' She didn't believe me, Bobby. I know she didn't." Jane didn't move or look at me as she spoke.

I could imagine the nurse's round face with her bedside-manner smile badly concealing her disbelief. No, the nurse probably hadn't believed her. Undoubtedly hundreds of girls had told her the public-rest-room story. Day after day, girls must swear to their innocence by that story. But Janie—that she should have gonorrhea was so out of character as to be unthinkable. I had heard tales of promiscuity among the Army wives. Some of it, on a very mild scale, I had seen. I had seen girls whose husbands were in night

school and didn't get in till one in the morning, whiling away the evenings chatting and flirting with soldiers at the U.S.O. club. Other girls told me, with whispers and finger pointing, that some of these girls dated the soldiers. And daily notes in the Neosho paper told of girls being picked up in parks and bus stations, with follow-up notes a few days later about how one of them had been sent to the Monett Isolation Hospital for treatment. The Public Health Department was used to this. Jane was just another case to them, another girl using the public-rest-room story.

"The things that nurse asked me, Bobby," Jane said. She shuddered as though shying away from the memory. "She asked me if I was sure my husband hadn't had 'any outside contact.' " Jane shook her head as though trying to clear it.

"If there's anything I'm sure of, anything at all, it's that," she said brokenly. "God, this will break Bruce's heart. Oh, Bobby, it's impossible."

I sat in a chair looking at her, her freshly starched dress pressed into wrinkles as her whole body seemed to sag.

"The nurse is a damn fool, Janie," I said angrily, appalled at the obviously stupid, routine way she had talked to Jane.

"Oh, Lord! I feel unclean all over," Jane said dully.

"She's a fool, honey, a fool!" I said vehemently. "You've got to go to another doctor right away."

Jane and I talked for a long time. I saw her despair change to anger, and I knew she was better. I called Dr.

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Raymond, reportedly the best doctor in town, and made an appointment for her. She shut herself in her room until the time for her appointment, refusing to go out to lunch with me. When she came back from the doctor's she looked weary and discouraged.

"He doesn't see any signs of it, but he can't tell," she said. "He's got to wait for the tests to be developed."

I hardly saw Jane for the next two days. I saw her husband go into the house at night, but they never came out on the porch, or came next door to chat with Spence and me as they usually did. On Friday I went over to tell her that the course had been postponed again, and would start on Monday.

"That's time for your new tests to come through, Janie," I said cheerfully. "And we can get this mess straightened out."

Jane wasn't interested. She was sitting in her room on her carefully made bed, neatly dressed, not doing anything. I felt miserable that she was torturing herself and that I was impotent to help her. I closed the door and went home.

On Saturday Jane came to find me, and the minute I saw her face I knew it was all right.

"Bobby, it was all a mistake, a ghastly mistake. There's not a sign of it. Not a sign. Dr. Raymond is so mad he can hardly control himself. He says he's going to blast that Public Health department off the face of the map. Oh, Bruce is going to want to kill someone. Not a sign of it, Bobby, I'm perfectly all right." I was so happy I hugged her. It was wonderful to see her smiling. The

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way she held her shoulders and carried her head showed that confidence had poured back into her body. We spent time in lacing the Public Health Department with every charge we could think of.

"It's that silly little nurse," Jane said angrily. "When I was there having those tests, I saw her juggling the slides around. She obviously got them mixed up. Gosh, I'll never go near that place again." She suddenly grinned. "My, I feel better. I feel as though I had had a Turkish bath. I never really believed it, but those awful doubts that kept chasing through my head . . ." She laughed happily. "Now what are we going to do about Mrs. Potter? Dr. Raymond promised to call her, and fix it up. Why don't you phone her, Bobby, will you? And ask her if it's all set."

We perched ourselves comfortably around the telephone with cigarettes and I rang the number. Mrs. Potter sounded distinctly unfriendly.

"The course starts Monday for you, Mrs. Klaw," she said.

"What about Mrs. Andrews?" I asked.

"Mrs. Andrews is not eligible," she said firmly. "I've told you that before."

"But Mrs. Potter," I said. "Dr. Reid's tests were wrong. There was some mistake. Haven't you talked to Dr. Raymond?"

"I'm afraid we have to make the decision, Mrs. Klaw," she said coldly. "Our medical board has already met and selected the candidates."

I was thoroughly angry.

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"But you don't want the decision based on incorrect information, do you, Mrs. Potter?" I ask stiffly.

"I'm afraid it's all settled, Mrs. Klaw," she said. "There's nothing more to say about it."

"But that's unfair, Mrs. Potter," I blurted out involuntarily. "Here's a girl who wants to do something useful, a girl who has gone through sheer hell because of an inexcusable mistake, and you . . ."

"We are the ones who are running the course, not you, Mrs. Klaw," Mrs. Potter said icily. "And I'm afraid you'll have to abide by our decisions." I hung up the phone roughly.

"The woman's an idiot," I said. "I'm about ready to say to hell with the whole business."

But Jane was more determined.

"We can't stop now, Bobby," she said passionately. "The medical board, whoever it is, think what they're thinking."

She paused and I knew she was visualizing fingers pointing from every porch as she walked down the street. Heads shaking, people only too ready to believe that this soldier's wife was no good. I remembered Mrs. Upton's conviction that soldiers' wives were no good. I remembered the director of the club who thought that some of us were no better than streetwalkers.

"And darn it, I want to take this course," Jane went on. "For a year and a half now, I've done nothing but read headlines about the war and contribute to the congestion in Army towns. We can't give up so easily,

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Bobby. I'm going down to talk to Mrs. Potter, if she'll talk to me at all."

I felt humbled by Jane's sincerity, and ashamed of my anger.

"Gosh, Janie," I said. "I hope I haven't spoiled your chances by getting mad at her."

"Well, if you have, if she'll let a grudge like that keep me from taking this course, she's a smaller person even than I think."

And she was smaller than either of us thought. She refused to see Jane, and never talked to either of us about it again. She appointed an emissary to deal the final blow. The emissary was the fluttery woman who had acted as selection committee, and the blow was delivered by phone.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news, Mrs. Klaw," the woman said nervously. "We've just all been working like dogs on it, but we just can't find enough transportation to go around. We've just worked and worked and worked, but we can only find one car to make the trip to Joplin every day. It can hold only four people, so two of the six applicants aren't going to be able to take the course. We had a terrible time deciding who to leave out, because you're all so well suited for the work," she paused for breath, "but finally we decided it would be only fair to let the town girls take it instead of the Army wives, because they'll be here longer to work in the hospital. So, sorry as I am, I'm afraid you and Mrs. Andrews won't be able to join the class. There seems to be some question about Mrs. Andrews, anyway. We

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can't tell you how sorry we are, with all the interest you girls have shown, to have this happen at the last moment like this, but we have been trying to get cars and we just couldn't. And I know you'll understand about our selecting the town girls instead of you two."

I understood and said so. I didn't argue—this fluttery woman obviously wasn't to blame—but when she said that perhaps another course would start in about four weeks and they'd keep my application in mind, I said quickly that I wasn't interested.

"I do hope you're not offended, Mrs. Klaw," she said nervously. "We certainly wish we could take everyone, but you know how it is."

I said good-bye and hung up.

Jane received the news with her lips set but without saying a word. We sat on the bed in her room, staring blankly out the narrow, high window. I felt weary and disgusted.

Out in the hot, quiet street, we saw a newsboy distributing papers on a bicycle. He folded the papers skillfully into tight balls, and threw them against the steps of the houses as he passed. The paper delivered to Jane's house hit the porch steps and bounced back into the yard.

Automatically Jane got up to go and get it. I watched her walk out into the yard, unknot the paper, and walk back into the house, reading the headlines as she came.

- VIII -

EATING IN NEOSHO

I HAD NEVER thought much about vitamins until I came to Neosho, and found that I wasn't getting any. In Neosho's few and indifferent little cafés, I came to suspect that the vitamins had been thoroughly sweated out of the food before the customers ever received it.

Spencer and I didn't comment on the first meal we ate in Neosho, but with his appetite gone strictly GI, he cleaned his plate, ploughed through a stack of stale, monotonous, white store bread, and suggested mildly that I should ask someone which was the best restaurant in town.

I did ask a lot of people, but with no very encouraging results. Margaret Lewis at the Travelers Aid gave me a list of eating places.

"I couldn't say exactly which is the best," she said.

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"Where do you eat?" I asked.

"Oh, I eat at all of them, on and off," she said. "When I want a good meal I go over to Joplin."

For us, without a car, and with a minimum of time, that was little help. The Army wives all had their preferences.

"I think the Brown Derby's the best," a girl told me, but a new arrival sitting with us up at the U.S.O. club squelched that idea.

"My God!" she said. "Is that the best? I ate lunch in there today, and ordered fried chicken. You know that part of the chicken wing that people usually cut off and throw away or use for stewing? Well, that was what I got. Two of them and nothing else. And I paid eighty-five cents. Is that really the best?"

Spence and I tried the Brown Derby a couple of times, and decided that it was for very small people who had just eaten a large meal somewhere else.

We worked up our own tepid enthusiasms. A place called Bailey's, crowded, hot and dirty, seemed to us comparatively good.

"As long as I don't have to look in the kitchen," I said, "I can be perfectly happy eating here." But one night that illusion was shattered, too.

Spence had come in early, and feeling happy at having a long evening together, we got extravagant and ordered some of Bailey's much-advertised Kansas City steaks. We could smell those steaks from the moment they left the kitchen. The waitress didn't seem at all surprised when we sent them back. The second try

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wasn't much better, and I still couldn't eat much of mine. Spence finished it off.

"Maybe this is just that Kansas City taste," he said.

That night I had a mild attack of food poisoning, and I spent the day worrying whether my husband was in the station hospital battling nausea. Tougher than I, he didn't get sick, but we never went to Bailey's again.

We tried a large barnlike place called the Dome Café one night, and got tremendous steaks, with a not unpleasant but wholly strange flavor.

"A very tasty horse," Spence said pleasantly, and cleaned up his plate.

The Dome obviously didn't specialize in food. There were only about five small booths in the whole room, and they were all deserted, while a group of soldiers stood at the bar. A sign on the door forbade ladies to come in, but that just applied to "unmarried ladies," the proprietor told us, glancing slyly at my wedding ring. A gay, stocky little girl waited on us, surprised that we wanted food, and not recognizing the word menu. She asked us curiously if we wanted such things as napkins and salt and pepper. Her method of clearing the table was unique and we sat and watched it. She stacked the dishes on a towel, twisting the ends like a tourniquet over her bundle, and carried it off with a fine one-handed swish. She seemed more at home between trips to and from the kitchen when she stopped to coach a soldier playing pinball, or took a quick turn around the dance floor with another soldier to the music of the jukebox. Her quick, graceful walk fascinated us.

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Spence grinned as she circulated among the soldiers at the bar, artfully decoying and rebuffing them.

"I think waiting's just a side line with that girl," he said, laughing. (I later learned from Margaret that he was right. She was a Cherokee Indian who soon landed in jail and was shipped off to the Monett Isolation Hospital for treatment.) Within a week after we ate there, the Dome was added to the off-bounds list for the soldiers.

In another two weeks, I began to suspect that it wasn't only economy that made most of the married men eat their evening meal at camp. Spencer was faithful—he came in for dinner every night that he could—but hungry, and we learned to skip the inevitable wind-up of a Neosho table d'hôte meal—victory sherbet with indistinguishable artificial flavoring and brilliant artificial coloring. Instead we bought large boxes of ice cream and retired to our room to eat them.

We found Sunday breakfast a disturbing meal. Six days a week in the Army, Spencer's natural lethargy about getting out of bed in the morning was thwarted. On Sunday, his one day out of camp, he frankly never wanted to get up. But neither of us liked eating dinner for our first meal of the day, and no breakfast was served in Neosho after twelve. A couple of experiences of breakfasting on pork chops, greasy style, and fried chicken, equally greasy, finally gave me the lever I needed to pry him out of bed on Sundays, and we joined the mob fighting into the restaurants before the breakfast curfew.

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The restaurant that we at one time decided was the best was a neat, clean, shiny red-and-chromium diner called Donnally's, some distance from the center of town. It advertised widely in Neosho, though why any restaurant should bother to advertise we never knew. On its match folders, the management stated that Donnally's served the best food in the Southwest. Its specialty was a dish called "nigger chicken," which Spence and I didn't eat for a long time because we disliked the name so intensely. It wasn't really necessary to eat their chicken to get the idea anyway. Practically all the food was fried in the same manner, and we got what Donnally's considered that "nigger" flavor by eating such things as chicken-fried steak, sweetbreads, or chicken livers. The food was fairly good, though I'm sure that the Southwest somewhere must have better to offer, but the fried crust on everything palled. Munching through chicken liver one evening which was four fifths crust and one fifth liver, Spencer asked curiously:

"What do you suppose they fry their stuff in?"

I didn't know, but I started inquiries along the Army wife grapevine.

"Why, I know," Pat Jacobs told me one day. "They fry everything in cornflakes."

Luckily we were soon released from the crowded, expensive restaurant eating and the continual grease and cornflakes. And none too soon either, because out of economy—or laziness about fighting the mob and waiting for inexperienced waitresses to bring food—I had gone onto the two meal a day diet which most of the

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Army wife restaurant gang settled for, and had dropped ten pounds in a month. Spencer, on the other hand, had taken to fortifying himself largely at lunch, and was becoming an accomplished chowhound with a tendency to fall asleep in his afternoon classes. But when I moved from the Uptons' to my new room with a family named Blake, I was allowed to use the kitchen, and we had two relatively blissful months of home-cooked food.

When I first moved in, Mrs. Blake explained frankly that it might be a little confusing with three couples plus herself and her son trying to cook and eat in one kitchen.

"But eating out is so tough on you girls," she said. "And I think we can work it out."

Mrs. Blake's kitchen was large and sunny and well-equipped. The only disadvantage was that the icebox was small, more suited to one family than four. Particularly on a Saturday when we were all stocked for the weekend, bundles were liable to tumble out when the door was opened, but by means of elaborate sectioning off, and piling we managed pretty well at first. We kept different hours, and one of the girls, who worked out at camp, usually ate there where the food was cheaper and better than in town.

Those two months were the happiest I spent in Neosho. I had always loved to cook, and with Spencer's Army-inspired appetite, cooking was more than ever a satisfaction. Also his taste had changed somewhat, giving him a terrific and wholly new craving for sweets, and I baked cakes and pies to my heart's content. Although I knew perfectly well that my being in Neosho at all

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was a tremendous boost to my husband's morale, somehow I had missed having any part in his physical welfare, and being able to cook at least one meal a day for him like a normal woman made me very happy. When we sat down together to eat a meal I had prepared, and later did the dishes together, even though there were other people in the kitchen, I lost the uncomfortable sense that I was just dating my husband every night, and actually had little relation to him or what he was doing. We began to feel like a married couple again, forcibly separated at ten o'clock every night, but still a properly married couple.

I had a slight struggle with the point system during those two months, for I could get no ration book for Spencer. He was living on the Post, and was supposedly rationed on the Post. The one meal a day he ate with me, therefore, had to be managed out of my sixteen weekly red points, and we found ourselves eating large quantities of chicken. I finally found it impossible, and started bumming points from the restaurant-fed wives who didn't use them, for Neosho groceries didn't seem to care whether the points I paid them were attached in my book or not.

Spencer ate magnificently during those two months, with dinner at camp at noon, and another dinner with me at night. We both feasted on fresh vegetables, which the Army sidetracked in favor of salads, and which the Neosho restaurants—the few of them that ever dickered with such folderol—sweated to a pulp before serving.

By contrast with eating out, cooking at the Blakes' was

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wonderful, but actually it was a process demanding the most intricate dovetailing, tact and consideration. One hot Sunday all those things somehow were thrown to the wind, and hell broke lose in the kitchen.

The confusion started because all of us who boarded in the house went swimming together at a nearby resort, and came home together equally ravenous and equally impatient. The men made a poor show of sitting contentedly on the porch waiting for food, with, as Spencer said, "Our three stomachs rumbling in unison." The three girls, Myra, Janice and myself, descended on the sink, the icebox, and the stove with the common intention of cooking three fine Sunday dinners for our husbands.

We all found with imperfectly concealed annoyance that the oven could be set at only one temperature at a time, that there were only four burners on the stove, and that one saucepan could not be used to cook two vegetables simultaneously. We took turns with the one sharp paring knife, and tried to keep our various groceries straight.

Through all this confusion, Mrs. Blake showed admirable restraint. She tried to keep out of the kitchen, and when she came in to get ice cubes or on her way through to the back yard, she grinned at us and didn't say a word.

The confusion seemed funny to us at first, and we all laughed when Myra discovered she was doing a careful salt and pepper job on Janice's chicken.

"Service," Janice said, "it's wonderful."

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"Whose potatoes are these?" I asked, holding up a bag that had somehow landed on my section of the kitchen table.

"They're mine," Janice said. "You might have peeled them before you asked." I handed her the bag, grinning.

But it was an extremely hot day, and with every outlet of the stove streaming heat, the three of us were soaked with perspiration in no time. The good humor and amusement with which we had descended on the kitchen vanished, and it was no longer kidding when Janice said sharply to Myra:

"Look, honey, are those beans of yours ever going to be cooked?"

Spencer stuck his head into the kitchen at one point and called me. With dripping hands and firmly clutching a half-peeled potato I came out.

"Maybe we ought to go out to eat, baby," he said. "It's so damned hot and crowded in there."

With my meatloaf already in the oven, I snapped at him.

"It's a little late to think of that, Spencer," I said. He retreated to the porch meekly.

Order was not maintained in the Blake kitchen that Sunday, but at least we worked out a one-way traffic system around the kitchen table from sink to stove. We never did clear the way to the icebox, because three soldiers came visiting Janice and her husband, and parked themselves around it to talk. I was so hot and so harassed by the time the meal was ready, that I was no

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longer hungry, and we ate, washed dishes and were out in forty-five minutes.

Sitting in the back yard, gradually cooling off, we watched the others cleaning up, the strange soldiers milling back and forth as all three of them plus Janice and her husband tried to wash dishes.

"Maybe," Spence said gently, "we ought to plan to go out for Sunday dinner after this. Someone's got to go, and we eat at home more during the week than the others do." Flapping my skirt violently to try to create a breeze, I agreed with him.

But we never had a chance to exercise our Sunday altruism, for Mr. Blake, who had been away on a defense job, came home for a vacation, decided he had been living in a boarding house long enough, and we were all gently barred from the kitchen.

During our two months of eating at home, the restaurant situation had changed. Bailey's was closed for two months for remodeling. The Brown Derby had taken to serving less food less of the time, and offered its meager meals for only eight hours a day. A couple of the older eating places stayed doggedly open, but roped off large sections of their tables because they couldn't get help.

The owner of the Ozark Eaterie glared at us one night when we ventured in there to eat, and told us we better go away.

"Are you closed?" Spencer asked.

"Not exactly," he said. "But two of my cooks quit today when their husbands got furloughs, and the wife's

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home sick in bed. And my freezing unit is busted." We left him standing stolidly in the door of his disintegrated establishment.

Three more of the smaller places were closed with a fell swoop one day, when the Public Health Department got unexpectedly vigorous. The Neosho paper reported it drily, saying that the three places would be temporarily shut down. "In its survey of Neosho's restaurants," it concluded, "the Public Health Department today confiscated thirty pounds of contaminated meat."

Tinker's, a hot, dark, boxcarlike little restaurant, where the food was relatively appetizing, but the cockroaches refused to stay in the kitchen where we didn't have to think about them, managed to stay open with only an occasional day off; but the other standby, "Donnally's Cornflake Palace," as Spencer liked to call it, ran into difficulty.

I first discovered it when I hiked over there for breakfast one morning, and found a large white sign on the door, saying "Will Open at Four PM." Peering through the door, I saw the management clustered disconsolately around the cash register, sipping coffee and apparently arguing. It was a good half mile back to town, and I contemplated banging on the door, and trying to squeeze a cup of coffee out of them anyway, but they were obviously hardened to hungry people pleading through the door, and they didn't so much as look up at me.

That day an advertisement appeared in the local paper which explained Donnally's new hours. I like to

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think that the group I had seen around the cash register had been composing this prose at the very minute I had been there. Under the help-wanted column, the advertisement read:

WAITRESSES

Three typically alert young American women who would be bored with dull, slow work. Things happen fast here. Our employees are a bright, alive group of people. If you are qualified to join them apply to: George Donnally, Donnally's Restaurant.

They kept appealing for typically alert young women for some time, and finally the restaurant again invited its clientele to breakfast. Spence and I were there on a Sunday morning for its premiere.

The diner was fully staffed again, and we had been there so often that we could pick out instantly the three new alert girls who had been hired. One of them waited on us, and with minor omissions and confusion, she managed pretty well.

Another of the girls, though, with a sizable stretch of tables to take care of, got flustered under pressure, snapped at a customer who was mildly asking for water, and collided noisily with a girl carrying a tray of silver, knocking it to the floor. An amazed silence fell on the restaurant when the waitress took one look at the havoc she had wreaked, raised a typically alert foot, and booted the tray down the length of the aisles, scattering the silver into every booth. She then retired defiantly to

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the kitchen, and everyone stooped to pick up the cutlery within his reach. Mr. Donnally, smiling and unperturbed, passed up and down the room carrying the tray, and the highly amused customers dropped what they had picked up onto it, like contributions into a collection box.

The advertisement appeared again the next day, calling for one more typically alert young American woman.

The restaurants and their difficulties were the subject of much conversation among the Army wives gathered in the U.S.O. club all day. It wasn't so bad for the men, because if the various cafés were open at all, they were open at night to catch the soldier trade. And the men always had the alternative of staying at camp. For us, wanting a place to eat breakfast and lunch cheaply, and having to eat in Neosho, food was a problem. A lot of the wives settled for the food at the snack bar of the club, strictly sandwiches and doughnuts, but at least clean and cheap.

The YWCA workers at the club, visualizing us all growing lazy and pasty on the solid starch diet, tried to persuade the U.S.O. to add a little lettuce or tomatoes or greenery of some sort to the snack-bar sandwiches, but the director snorted at the idea of pampering the girls in this way.

"I don't want them eating in the club," the director told Miss Farnsworth. "This isn't a restaurant."

It was all right for him to snort, because as he told me emphatically on more than one occasion, he had his restaurant at home.

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"My wife," he said. "Best cook in America. Right there in my own home."

I was therefore completely surprised when the director called me into his office one day and asked me if I wanted a job planning and cooking a daily luncheon for the Army wives at the club.

"Why, the restaurant situation is terrible in this town!" he blustered, and went on to explain how he had finally stumbled across this well-known fact. "I went downtown for lunch today. I went to Bailey's, and I had to pay seventy-five cents for lunch. For nothing, Barbara, nothing at all. A little dab of this and that. And for dessert, you know what they gave me, a little dab of sherbet, no bigger than a quarter." He was very irate about Bailey's, and enthusiastic about his new scheme. He muttered about cold cuts and potato salad and sliced tomatoes. (The director loved sliced tomatoes; he wanted them at every meal, I found out later.)

It seemed to me a wonderful idea and I told him so.

"But don't expect any appreciation from the girls," he said quickly, abandoning his momentary generosity. "They don't appreciate anything, you know." Confident that he was not only wrong, but probably knew it himself, I didn't argue.

Hours were set for the luncheon, the price was established at a quarter a plate, and on the following Monday I started in. Spence and I had spent a large part of the preceding Sunday planning menus for the week, armed with an impressive book entitled *Food for Fifty*. I was nervous about the success of the project—it had

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had very little publicity—and I wondered if I could sell even the modest twenty-five plates I had allowed for.

Back in the kitchen behind the snack bar, I chopped celery and green pepper into an enormous salad bowl, conscious that the wives at the club were watching me through the door, and discussing the luncheon.

I was looking for a dishpan in which to wash my lettuce when I heard Pat Jacobs calling to me over the snack bar.

“Want some help, honey?” she asked.

I glanced at the kitchen clock, and saw I had plenty of time.

“Not at the moment,” I said. “I may call on you later. Thanks, Pat.”

Pat’s offer of help I had expected, but I hadn’t expected the six other offers I got that morning from girls I didn’t know very well. I was pleased and surprised.

The director bustled in at my busiest moment, and asked me what the menu was. I told him—potato salad, olives, sliced tomatoes, crackers and ham.

“Ham,” he said. “Ham, the first day? The Jewish girls won’t like that. But don’t you pay any attention to them,” he went on quickly. “Those Jewish girls don’t like anything. And we’re not cooking for the Jews any more than for the Catholics.” He went on to warn me that the Jewish girls wouldn’t like any unkosher foods. “And mind you, they’ll certainly tell you about it.”

The director, as it often happened, was wrong. I had no complaints that first day or at any time after that from the Jewish girls.

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As it got near twelve o'clock when I was to start serving, I nervously arranged and rearranged my food, lifted plates down off the high shelves where they were stacked, and hoped desperately that the whole idea was as good as I had thought it was. I had fleeting, fidgety pictures of mountains of leftover potato salad.

The girl who worked behind the snack bar stuck her head into the kitchen.

"Ready to start serving?" she asked.

"Any time," I said.

"Well, let's go," she said. I looked past her, and saw that the waiting customers completely lined the snack bar.

In fifteen minutes, it was all over. All the food I had was served, and we were regretfully turning girls away. The plates came back empty, or with only stray pieces of lettuce, and the girls—even the Brooklyn girls—were exorbitant in their praise.

"Damn fine, Bobby," Pat Jacobs said. "We'd pay seventy-five cents at Donnally's for a meal like this."

"Gosh, I love potato salad," one girl said simply.

"Are you going to serve these lunches every day?" another asked. I said we were and that I'd try to plan enough for every one in the future. "That's wonderful," the girl said. "I'm going home and revise my food budget."

I was feeding fifty by the end of the week, and though the job was tiring, it gave me a tremendous satisfaction to see how much the girls appreciated the inexpensive, fresh food.

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One day while collecting empty plates off the snack bar, I heard two wives I didn't know arguing about how much money they were saving.

"At least a quarter a day," one girl said. "I never managed to eat in town for less than fifty cents."

"The quarter's only part of it," the other girl said. "My God, I've quit taking vitamin pills, and do you know how much that saves me? At least a buck a week."

I carried my load back into the kitchen, scraped the dishes, and let them slide into my dishpan, smiling to myself. The Neosho wives, I thought happily, restaurants or no restaurants, were going to get at least one square meal a day.

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LIFE COULD BE WONDERFUL

ONE FRIDAY when Spencer told me that he had drawn KP the next Monday, I was disappointed, for that Monday was to be our second wedding anniversary.

"Then you won't be able to get in to town at all?" I asked glumly. I couldn't help thinking of our last anniversary. Four days in the country, and not a uniform in sight.

"Probably not," Spence said. "But what the hell, honey, we'll celebrate Saturday night."

Our Saturday nights were treasured occasions. No ten o'clock bus to catch, no reveille the next morning. Enjoying it highly, we always took off our wristwatches on those nights, and refused so much as to consider what time it was.

We decided that we'd go to Joplin for our premature

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anniversary party, where good restaurants were available and where it was possible to get a drink, and arranged to meet on the Joplin bus to save the time it would take Spence to come to the house. Spence told me that I had better cash a check.

"And Bobby," he said, "wear your white dress, will you?" I laughed and mentally congratulated myself for having washed and ironed it the day before. When Spencer liked a dress he liked it completely, and with predictable consistency he wanted me to wear it on every occasion. This dress had headed the request list for the past seven Saturdays.

Saturday was a day of preparation in Neosho. At the club and throughout the town, the wives and the townspeople girded themselves for the weekend. The town's beauty parlor was mobbed. Lines of girls waited to use the ironing board and sewing machine at the club. The shops and restaurants opened late in preparation for an all-night trade. Soldiers started trickling into town about noon, quiet and businesslike at that time, shy at having invaded before the regular evening invasion hour. Queues of them which reached out into the street waited at every cleaning establishment, trying to retrieve long-promised uniforms. In the groceries, the Neoshoans predominated, but there were some Army wives in each store, laying in groceries if they had the chance to cook, more often buying fruit or cookies to provide between-meal snacks for their husbands.

Because the girls were busy elsewhere, luncheon at the club was always slow on Saturday, and I finished

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early that afternoon, and hurried home to do some ironing. The house, luckily, was empty, and I stood out on the back porch where the board was set up, fortified with ice water and cigarettes, and pressed uniforms according to GI regulations—pants' creases running all the way up to waistband, and the mandatory Signal Corps creases in the body of the shirt, one down through each pocket, and three down the back. Ironing shirts and pants was a skill I had acquired since coming to Neosho and I was proudly particular about doing them correctly.

As I was stopping to sew a button on a pair of undershorts, the phone rang. It was Spencer.

"Look, honey," he said, "this is a hell of an unsatisfactory way to do this, but will you stop by the florist's on your way to the bus station and pick up your flowers? I ordered them, but they won't deliver. You'll have to pay for them, too," he added ruefully.

Pleased that he had thought of flowers, I laughed at his embarrassment. I was used to paying for things, to doing the errands. I thanked him excitedly.

"Why aren't you at drill, Spence?" I asked.

"Well, I should be," Spence said. "And I better get out of this PX before someone starts checking up."

I finished the ironing, washed my hair and bathed, put on my white dress and spectator pumps on stockingless feet. I went down to the florist on my way to the bus station and picked up my corsage—luscious, deep-red gladioli blossoms fastened with white ribbon.

"I hope this is what your husband wanted," the florist

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said doubtfully. "He insisted on white ribbon, though I prefer the silver myself." I said it was lovely, and pinned it on, enormously pleased with Spencer. He had remembered that I hated silver tinsel on corsages.

It was about six-thirty when I got to the bus station, and already uneven lines of men had formed, waiting for various buses. They were headed for Joplin, for Springfield, for Monett, some as far away as Tulsa, mutually determined to get out of camp and away from Neosho for the weekend. They were gay, mildly rough-tongued, and polite to the girls in the crowd.

Forming themselves into lines was just habit, and actually in this case did little good. For the buses rolling around the corner parked anywhere they could find space, and the first person aboard was usually the one who could run fastest. The soldiers didn't care if there was any room for them in the buses or not. They just wanted to get on, and only by firmly closing the doors could the drivers stop the onrush. One small, dark, surly looking private got angry when the door of a Monett bus closed in his face, and he pounded on the glass, arguing with the driver that there was plenty of room. The driver, obviously used to the urgency of traveling servicemen, paid no attention, and the men inside leaned out to taunt him.

"See your chaplain, soldier," someone yelled, and the advice was taken up like a chant by the men inside the bus.

"See your chaplain, fella. Get a T.S. slip, soldier. Tell it to General Millikin. This isn't a Brooklyn subway,

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pal." The bus pulled out, leaving the angry soldier standing on the curb.

By this time, I was up at the head of my line, and bus after bus came in without Spencer. I searched them carefully, walking back and forth along the outside to be sure I wasn't missing him, to the amusement of the soldiers inside.

A curly-haired boy leaned out of one bus to watch my search.

"Hey," he said as I passed. "Won't I do?" I grinned at him, and shook my head. "Well," he said cheerfully, "there's no accounting for taste."

I finally spotted Spencer on a completely jammed bus, a bus that seemed to be carrying all Joplin passengers, since only one man got off at Neosho. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to get on it, but a soldier summed up the situation quickly, and tapped the man ahead of me on the shoulder.

"Hey, soldier," he said, "this girl's meeting someone on that bus. How about it?"

"Oh, sure, sure," the soldier said cheerfully, and with a playful politeness he bowed me into the bus ahead of him. I worked my way down the aisle, disturbing soldiers who were sitting on the floor, on camp chairs, and on the arms of seats. The soldier next to Spencer rose to give me his place, paying no attention to our protests. Something about the uniform seemed to make soldiers as courteous to wives as they were fresh to unattached females. A girl by herself in Neosho was fair game and was cheerfully and hopefully accosted on

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every street corner, but a girl with a soldier was definitely private property, and was given the utmost respect.

With the unconcern for crowds that we had learned from seldom being anywhere else, we kissed each other and settled down to talk. I thanked Spencer for the flowers, and we admired them together.

"I've got a surprise," Spence said. I could tell by the way he spoke that he was excited. "I was going to hold it till we got to the restaurant, but I can't do it." He paused, and then all in one breath said, "I've gotten permission to live off the Post." I was so surprised I couldn't speak. After months of longing for this permission, of angling for it in every way Spence knew, it had suddenly been dropped in his lap. It meant no more clock watching in the evenings. It meant no more going to bed and waking up by myself. It meant being able to lie in bed and read together. It meant being able to smoke a good-night cigarette together in the dark privacy of our bedroom again. After months of missing these things, to me it meant being married again.

Spence squeezed my hand.

"Good, hey?"

"Very good, Spence." The evening couldn't have started more satisfactorily.

It took fifty minutes to get to Joplin, and once there we started trying to get off the bus five blocks ahead of our destination, and overran it by three blocks. Meeker's, the large bar and grill where we were going to eat, had started coping with Saturday night hours ago, and the

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waiters dodged around between the standees. We parked by a booth where two elderly men were just finishing their entree, and were promptly invited to sit down with them. The men insisted benevolently that they didn't want dessert, and gave us the booth to ourselves almost immediately.

"Well, I'll be damned," Spence said, surprised. It was the first time we had run across the reported civilian consideration of servicemen. In Neosho, there was none of it. Never had we heard of a soldier being offered so much as a free drink there, and nowhere, not even in the movie theatres, was there any reduction of rates for servicemen.

Dinner was one of those meals that we dreamed about while eating Neosho fare. Slow service that promoted the drinking of several old-fashioned first, shrimp cocktails, steak on dramatic sizzling platters, vegetables, fresh salad and cheese. We were lingering over the luxury of coffee and brandy when we spotted a friend at the bar.

Ned was an old friend, a college classmate of Spencer's who was a second lieutenant stuck at Crowder, as bored with it as most of the enlisted men were. Spence saw him and pointed him out, and we laughed at the sight before we called to him. He was sitting directly across from our booth, with two Tom Collinses lined up in easy reach. He had on hornrimmed glasses, which gave him a serious, studious look, and he was deep in *Time*. An evening paper and a copy of *Life* in his lap made it look as though he had settled down at the Meeker bar

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for the evening. He seemed completely oblivious of the girls and men on either side of him.

"Well," Spence said, "we'll have to do something about that." He got up, and quietly reached over Ned's head to capture one of his drinks.

"Christ almighty, old man," Spence said sternly, "this lining 'em up is bad for the liver." Ned looked up, surprised, grinned slowly, and then looked back at me.

"I'll be damned if it isn't the young Klaws," he said, and gathering up his reading matter and his glasses, the men moved back to our booth.

We had more brandy, abandoning the coffee this time, with toasts to Spence and me and to Spencer's new living-off-the-Post status. As no more standees were hovering in the aisles we sat at our table a long time.

We let Ned, who had been frequenting the fashionable Joplin hotspots longer than we had, lead the way from Meeker's. Stopping to pick up a bottle of whisky, he conducted us to a place called the Stork Club.

"No celebrities or rhumba band," Ned said, "but a very genial spot, anyway."

The Stork Club, except for the fancy connotation of its name, was like any one of dozens of large country dance halls. Low-roofed, tremendous, badly lighted and ventilated. One creaking waiter, at least forty years over draft age, attended to the needs of all the tables. He was constantly being pursued over the floor by soldiers who could get his attention in no other way. We found a table by a window, set our bottle in the middle

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of it, and Spencer collared the waiter to ask for some set-ups.

"Take your time, soldier," the old man said pleasantly. "I can't promise anything."

"Why don't I come get the stuff," Spence said, rising.

"That's the only way you ever will get it, son," the old man said. "Come along."

While waiting for the makings to appear, Ned and I danced on the spacious dance floor, among the girls in cotton or slacks and the men in khaki. A few Joplin civilians were there, even a few self-conscious young male civilians, but the place was mostly populated with soldiers. Ned and I somehow got in between a pair of civilian jitterbugs, and collided violently with them. I felt the man's tweed coat as it brushed along my elbow.

"Sorry," Ned said pleasantly.

"Don't be," I said. "I like the feel of his coat. There's something about tweed . . ."

Ned looked at me and grinned. "Getting the khaki jitters, Mrs. K.?"

"Not exactly," I said.

"We'll go back and bump him again," Ned said.

"Oh, it's not that bad," I laughed.

We got back to the table just as Spence appeared balancing a gigantic bowl of ice in one hand, and carrying a pitcher in his other. He pulled the glasses out of his pockets.

"Self-reliance," he said. "That's what I've learned in the Army."

The evening went fast. Mostly we just sat and talked.

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Occasionally couples drifted to our table, had a drink with us and drifted on. Some of them knew Ned, some were our friends. There was a large open informality about the place. Everyone was very gay, and few people seemed to be drunk. The regular MP contingent was there, but the men were thoroughly absorbed with a very pretty dark-haired hat-check girl, and they didn't circulate among the couples inside. Once when Spencer and I had been dancing for a long time, we came back to the table to find Ned deep in a conversation with a Wac. Nancy was a corporal, sturdy, vaguely pretty, and upright and high chinned above her GI tie and collar. I couldn't help thinking for the millionth time that the War Department could have picked no more unfortunate costume for its women soldiers.

We never knew quite where Nancy came from, but she was nice, and she told me a lot about the Women's Army while Spence and Ned were arguing about Turkey's neutrality, the hoped-for invasion, and the American Army. I heard snatches of their talk as Nancy enthused about the corps, with all the ardor and severity of a newly converted Communist talking about Communism, or a Californian talking about California.

Although the two corners of the table were immersed in different conversations, Spence was holding my hand, and fingering it thoughtfully as he talked, linking me with both groups. I felt happy and glowing and gay.

Ned and Nancy disappeared about four, and, after dividing the last of the bottle between us, we left.

Twelve or thirteen couples were lined up along the

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roadside waiting for taxis, sitting down in the grass where we could just vaguely make them out, or standing out in the road, caught in the light of the Stork Club sign. The place was far out in the country, much farther than I had realized when we came out, and the road running by it was dark and deserted. Occasional headlights could be seen sweeping down the hill toward us, and the couples would surge toward the road, but the car was seldom a cab.

Spence and I leaned against a parked car to wait, but soon moved away in embarrassment at a scene in the next car. A disheveled and slightly drunken girl suddenly opened the door of the car, and shouted back at her escort inside. She was telling him to go away and leave her alone, and her language was a combination of everyday profanity and GI filth. From the soldiers, this language seldom sounded vulgar, but from the girl, fumbling unsteadily with her blouse, it was shocking.

As we moved away, we saw the soldier get out of the car and walk away, adjusting his hat, and ignoring the shrieking girl.

In about half an hour a whole group of taxis arrived, and with two other couples we snared one of them.

Joplin was dark and quiet with only an occasional soldier sauntering wearily—and not always steadily—along the street. We headed for the one all-night eating place, a diner, where we found Ned and Nancy, and after eating scrambled eggs, the four of us caught the five-thirty bus back to Neosho and camp.

We all sat on the back seat, and weary, sobered and

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quietly happy, I promptly fell asleep on Spencer's shoulder. In the damp chilliness of a Neosho morning, I woke up once to find Spence asleep and Ned and Nancy talking formally, both apparently bored with the whole proceedings.

"That's very interesting," I heard Ned say politely. "Where did you learn about philosophy?" Thinking how nice it was to be married, and never to have that bored-with-your-escort, end-of-the-evening feeling, I snuggled back into Spencer's shoulder, and dozed off again.

We walked home from the bus station across the park, going quietly so as not to wake the soldiers sleeping on benches and steps, feeling exhilarated and private and gay. The night-lamp was still burning in the Blakes' living room, looking pale and useless in the broad daylight, and when we got in bed, the daytime heat was already beginning to press into the room through the closed Venetian blinds.

"Happy anniversary, Spence," I said.

"Happy anniversary, darling."

The telephone which was right outside our door woke me about eleven the next morning. I struggled into a wrapper and hurried to answer it before it woke everyone else in the house.

It was Margaret Lewis.

"Hope I didn't get you out of bed," she said. "I've wangled a day off tomorrow, and I'm catching a train

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for Kansas City about noon. I wondered if you two would like to use my car today and tomorrow?"

It was a strictly rhetorical question, and we arranged about picking it up. I thanked her profusely.

Spence was awake when I went back into the bedroom.

"Who was that?" he asked sleepily. I pushed him over where he had sprawled into my half of the bed, and lay down.

"Margie," I explained. "She's going to lend us her car until tomorrow. She's going up to Kansas City."

"Gee, that's wonderful," Spence said. "I hope we'd think to do things like that if we had a car." I grinned at him.

Margaret was going to pick us up on her way to the station. We dressed and made the bed and went out onto the porch to meet her. When we had deposited her on her train we drove over to Donnally's for breakfast, and tried to keep out of an argument about the coal strike with the couple sitting across the booth from us.

The man came from Kentucky and therefore "knew all about the coal strike." We felt that he was indeed a favored fellow and listened while he told us that all the miners who wanted to work were salting away almost two hundred dollars a week, and that any miner who wasn't making that much "was just a lazy bastard."

"They ought to be drafted, and see what life is like on fifty bucks a month," the man said violently. We noticed the beautiful clothes that his wife wore, and the Packard roadster they drove away in.

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"He'll be president of his bank some day," Spence said, smiling, when they were gone.

"Bless his nasty labor-baiting heart," I added. We both laughed.

We debated the best way to make use of the unusual luxury of a car. Because the day was a typical scorcher, the first move was obviously swimming. We went back to the house to pick up bathing suits and see if either of the couples there wanted to go with us. But they were out, and we set off in private splendor for a swimming pool near Joplin. We had picked up four other soldiers by the time we got there, because though we loved being alone, Spencer had waited for buses and lifts too often to be able to leave men standing by the hot roadside while the back of our car was empty.

Even without uniforms or dogtags, and wearing every kind of swimming trunks, we could spot the soldiers at the pool. Darkly browned faces and hands and white untanned bodies showed exactly the outlines of their uniforms. It was hard to believe that they were the same bunch of tough-looking, cocky soldiers that I saw in Neosho every night. Without their uniforms, many of them looked thin-chested and ribby, like undeveloped boys.

The water was cold and lightly chlorinated, and we swam leisurely lengths of the pool, played on the slide, lined up to use the diving board, and finally sat on the concrete edge with our feet in the water to smoke a cigarette. With our bodies chilled and fresh-feeling we

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felt free, and silent, and lazy, and we loved the usually intolerable heat of the sun on our wet skins.

A tall, lithe girl lifeguard patrolling the far side of the pool roused Spence to drowsy comment about what a charming thing the manpower shortage was, and with a gentle shove I pushed him into the water. He came up sputtering, made a lunge for my legs, and connected forcibly with a sturdy little girl who was making splashy efforts to learn the crawl.

We stayed at the pool for about two hours, and then fortifying ourselves with hamburgers and coke, we drove back to Neosho, the heat rapidly replacing the delightful chill we had acquired.

As Janice and her husband and a crowd of friends were partying on the porch we retired to our bedroom, and managed to go to sleep, though the window at the head of our bed was not more than two feet from the gathering outside. In all the four years at college, I hadn't learned to ignore noise as completely as I had in a few months in Neosho. We were waked about seven by Janice calling through the Venetian blinds.

"Bobby," she said, "some friends here to see you." I put on a housecoat and went out. The friends were a young couple we knew in town, with their two small children, and a soldier who spent every weekend with them. Sitting on the floor in the back of the car was a basket of groceries, and a tremendous bucket full of cracked ice holding an up-ended watermelon.

"Come on, Bobby," Larry said, "We're all going over to the Elk river to go picnicking."

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"We all meaning who?" I asked, laughing.

"You and Spence and us," Larry said.

"Sounds wonderful," I said. "But we've got Spence to convince. He's asleep."

"I'll take care of that," Larry said, and got out of the car. I heard considerable noise and swearing from our room, and knew that Spence was being forcibly roused. The children heard it, too, and were delighted.

In a few minutes we were in the car, Spencer and I holding the children in our laps in the back seat. Larry picked a broad bend in the river about ten miles from town, which had a spreading rocky beach on each side of it. By the time we had all been swimming, guarding the children from the swift current, fighting against it ourselves and swimming with it in powerful bursts of imagined speed, it was dark. We built a fire, and squatting on logs and towels to protect ourselves from the sharp stones, we cooked hamburgers in a frying pan. There was considerable difficulty in keeping track of the salt and pepper and pickles in the clutter that soon developed around the fire. Susan, Larry's wife, turned out to be sitting squarely on the cigarettes, and the youngest child, Ricky, was discovered quietly building a sandpile in the butter pot. The children grew drowsy before we got around to eating the watermelon, and the little girl, Carol, rested her chin in her slice as she munched sleepily.

Gorged, sleepy and contented, we cleaned up the picnic leavings, searched for lost towels and scattered clothing, and piled back into the car. It was after eleven

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when we got home, and the children didn't even wake when Spencer and I lifted them gently off our laps.

In bed we shared a last cigarette, the ash tray balanced on Spencer's stomach.

"Gee, it's nice living off the Post," Spencer said. "Here I am at home with no snores on either side of me. It'll be wonderful not having to make my bed in the morning."

"What a thing!" I said teasing. "Is that all it means to you, darling?"

Well, not quite all," he said, rubbing his cheek against mine.

Before the cigarette was finished, he was asleep. I moved the ash tray, checked the alarm clock, pulled a sheet over us, and fell asleep myself.

It was still dark when the alarm sounded at four the next morning, and Spencer was up before I was.

I lay in bed and watched him dress, noting the warm look of his sunburn as he slipped his dogtags over his head.

"Why don't I drive you out to camp?" I said suddenly. I had just remembered that we still had Margaret's car.

"Oh, you don't want to get up at this hour," Spence protested. "Go on back to sleep, honey." He glowered at the darkness outside. "It's too early for anyone to get up. Damn KP!" But he gave in easily, and I put on a short housecoat and moccasins, and ran a comb through my hair.

It was cool and moist outside. A soldier passed as

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we were backing the car out, walking swiftly and quietly toward the bus station. We could see the light tan of his uniform in the black morning. We heard an alarm go off in the house next door, and saw a light come on. Another soldier probably, getting up in time to make an early reveille.

We were grateful for the warmth inside the car, and I lay against Spence's shoulder as he drove out to camp. Occasionally we saw the lights of other cars, all going in the same direction.

"There's a lot of people up at this hour," I said idly.

"Yeah, there're a lot of soldiers on KP every day," Spence said.

I felt friendly to all those people in the other cars, all up as early as I was, all moving along inside their warm cars, sharing what the people in the dark houses were sleeping through. A dull glow in the sky ahead of us marked the camp area, like an unreal, wide-awake city stuck in the middle of the peaceful countryside with no suburbs to blend them together.

I couldn't get on the Post at that hour, so we parked at the MP station at the gate to wait for a bus which would carry Spence in to his company area.

"Shall we have a cigarette, Bobby?" Spence said. "I don't think a bus will be along for about ten minutes."

"Before breakfast?" I asked.

"Oh, what the hell," he said, and lit them for both of us. We talked very softly. Loudness would have been

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as blatant in this secretive early morning as in a church. We talked about our wonderful weekend, and the day ahead of us.

"Now that I'm living off the Post," Spence said, "I'll be in tonight after all. Not till about nine-thirty probably, but I'll be in for the night anyway." A bus rolled up to the MP station, but it wasn't the one Spence wanted, and together we watched an MP climb into it.

"What's he getting in for?" I asked. Usually the MPs just inspected the buses from the outside.

"To wake the guys, I guess," Spence said. "They'd ride all around the camp and out again if someone didn't wake them." I saw he was right. In response to the kindly proddings of the MP, men sat up in almost every seat, and we saw that the bus, which had looked deserted, was almost full. Several men took off their ties with sleepy fumbling gestures, getting ready for a quick change into fatigues.

Finally the MP got out, and the bus drove down the lighted highway toward the barracks.

Spencer's bus pulled into the MP station as the first one rolled out, and he hurried over to board it. Sitting in the darkness of the car, I watched him walk down the lighted aisle inside the bus and pick a seat. He stared out the window toward the car, and waved. Though I knew he couldn't see me, I waved back.

I drove back to Neosho, and got back in bed to sleep until morning came to the town.

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AND SO WE LEAVE NEOSHO

I DON'T KNOW when we had first started talking about a furlough. Back in Washington probably, when as civilians we were planning ahead.

We had thought about it more often during my first months in Neosho, and our plans for it had shifted. We ruled out our original idea of spending ten days in a small secluded cabin in the woods somewhere; roughing it was now the last thing we wanted. I remembered all these things when the furlough was finally in sight, and by the time the date was set, October 2, I had the telegram home already composed in my mind.

"Christ, imagine having a newspaper to read that has all the news in it," Spence said at dinner on September 30th. "And imagine having the time to read it."

I looked up from my plate where I was trying to

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push aside the fried potatoes that I didn't want to find the meat that I did want, and smiled at him.

"It won't be long, darling," I said quietly. I was looking forward to the leisure of the two-day train trip when we would be able to share our observations while they were still fresh instead of hoarding them separately until the end of the day.

"I bet we're going to feel gauche and uninformed in front of our families, Bobby," Spence said. "It's kind of as though they've gone on thinking and reading and learning about the war, and we haven't learned much of anything." We, in the middle of what the country was going through, we didn't know anything about it any more, and we realized it.

"What we've been doing out here is the thing that's going to interest them, Spence," I said.

"What have we been doing?" Spence said a little satirically.

I knew what he was thinking. He couldn't tell people how good he had become at polishing his shoes, or what the powdery chocolate in K rations tasted like. There wasn't much to say about the long hours spent improving his speed at the Morse code. The satisfaction of drilling competently with other men, the boredom of repeating the exercise too many times, the feeling of impatience while standing retreat night after night to the tinny sound of the national anthem coming over the Crowder loud-speaker system—all these things were hard to communicate to other people.

"It's a struggle for me to remember what we're fight-

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ing for sometimes," he said, laughing slightly. Again I understood what he meant. The picture was too big around us, and a few tiny details—magnified too large—blinded us to the whole.

His voice grew warm, and the slight satiric edge was gone. "Gee, it'll be wonderful to see them all."

"I wonder how the point system is affecting people," I said, irrelevantly. Even these little things, things I had known so well and studied so hard at OWI, I didn't know any more. Our society of Army wives was too unreal even to include that. "I mustn't forget to take home my ration book."

We went on to talk about getting our tickets, cashing checks, paying our rent in advance.

"I wonder if I'll be able to dig my clothes out of the cleaners in time," Spence said. We discussed what we'd do in New York, avoiding any specific plans, not wanting anything that we must stick to.

"Let's ask one of the families to get theatre tickets for us when we wire," Spence said.

"To what?" I asked.

"It doesn't matter much, does it?" Spence said, laughing. "We won't have seen it." We walked home from the restaurant together, with our minds far away from Neosho, but very close together.

"Do you realize," Spence observed the next morning as he stood in front of the mirror tying his tie, "that this is the next to last morning for fifteen days that I'll be getting up in the dark. Let's never get up before noon in New York," he said. When he left, I went

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back to sleep, thinking how nice it would be to see men in civilian clothes again.

I woke up with an unusual feeling of busyness, and hurried happily all day. I went to the cleaners—for the third time that day—just before it closed at seven, and when I came home, bearing Spencer's spotless field jacket, he was there.

"It was a long hard struggle, darling," I said waving the jacket proudly. "But I got it."

"Thanks, honey," he said flatly. "I'm sorry you went to all that trouble." His voice sounded weary and ominous.

"Why, Spence? What's wrong?"

"No furlough, baby," he said tightly. "It's all been canceled. We ship out tomorrow instead." I didn't take in the last statement for a moment, only that we weren't going home. Spencer's face looked bleak and uncommunicative, and I knew he felt discouraged inside. I had seen him disappointed often in our seven months in the Army, and I knew the symptoms—the tightness, the cynicism and anger that left him more resilient, and able to start laughing more quickly. He had learned that these emotions were better than despair.

"You're shipping out," I said feebly, repeating the words, but still not understanding them.

"Yes," he said. "To California. Camp Beal."

I came to again, instantly, passionately frightened. California was a Coast, and coast means point of embarkation.

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"Not POE though, darling," he said quickly. "I don't know for how long or for what, but it's just another camp, and it doesn't mean I'm leaving the country yet." He took my hand to reassure me.

"I don't know anything about the place," he hurried on. "Or why I'm going there."

"Can I go with you, Spence?" I still felt hot and trembly with fear.

"I'm afraid not, Bobby," he said. "I'm traveling by troop train. You better wait here till I find out what it's all about and wire you. You can't tell, they might move me again in two days. You know, the old Army game." He was laughing already, partly to cheer me, partly because he had learned a lot in the Army.

"Or why don't you run home for a while, take your furlough anyway, and then come out to California when I'm settled?"

I giggled at his expression. Running home—thirteen hundred miles.

"On fifty bucks a month?" I said, smiling.

"I guess it's not too practical, is it?" he conceded.

We agreed that I would stay in Neosho and "settle our affairs." (That ought to take all of two hours, I thought. I had long ago sent home most of the clothes I had brought with me.) We figured out our arrangements carefully, checking directions back and forth. We congratulated ourselves on having said nothing to our parents about the pending furlough, and agreed that there was no point in mentioning it at all now.

"I'm shipping early in the morning, so I've got to

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go back to camp tonight," Spence said sadly. "We haven't much time, honey."

The evening had the quality of a three-hour wait at a railroad station, with the imminent separation squelching anything we might normally have thought of saying. I felt played out when Spencer left, and went right to bed. At six the next morning, I woke nervously, thinking for a moment that we had overslept the alarm. And then I remembered that it wasn't an ordinary morning. Spencer probably at this very moment was sitting waiting to get on his train. I could picture him perched on top of his barracks bags, hunched a little inside his blouse, talking idly with the man sitting nearest him, and smoking a cigarette. I could almost hear the normal mild griping at the delay, and I knew that inside, Spencer was probably excited.

It was only for a week or maybe two, I told myself that day at the club, and I felt quite gay as I arranged for someone to take over my job. I hung around when I was finished work, having nothing in particular to hurry back to the house for. I was sitting at the reception desk about six, soaking up the understanding sympathy of the girl on duty there, when Spence walked into the club.

"I thought I might find you here," he said, grinning. I was too delighted to wonder much. I felt as though someone had handed me an unexpected present.

"Shipping orders were canceled," Spence said. "And here I am, back in the battle of Camp Crowder."

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We spent a gay evening, surprised at being back to normal. He called at noon the next day to say his orders had been changed again, and that he was shipping out at four. Again I told the club officials I was leaving soon, again I dragged out my suitcases. And again he turned up that evening.

"Not shipping until tomorrow," he explained.

I was beginning to feel a little weary of the whole process, I felt that evening I would almost rather have him gone than to go through the good-byes again. Absent-mindedly I said that I'd see him for dinner when he left the next morning.

"Why, darling," he said, laughing, "I'm shipping today, remember? Don't you believe what the Army says any more?"

"No," I said shortly. Our good-bye was gay and tentative.

But I was called to the phone at the club that day, and a friend of Spencer's told me that he had really gone this time.

"He asked me to call you, Mrs. Klaw," the soldier said. "He says he'll wire as soon as he knows anything." I was surprised, but almost relieved. The Army blow-hot-blow-cold system had effectively taken the edge off the parting.

After three days of breaking in my replacement at the club, I left my job, in order to be ready to move out at any time. I made a list of the wind-up tasks to be done, and tried to ration them out over the time I figured I'd be in Neosho. I felt curiously loath to go

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to the club, as though somehow my particular place in it was cemented over, and I didn't belong. I went up there for lunch one day at the urging of my successor, and felt awkward standing at the snack bar waiting to be served with the other wives, watching the girls in the kitchen ladling up the food with the utensils I had used so often. I noted that Anne, the girl who had taken my place, used a different pan to mix the salad in, and I somehow wished that I was already gone.

In the rest room where I went to wash up, I met a girl I knew.

"Oh, I thought you had left, Bobby," she said. I explained that I was waiting to hear from Spence.

"What about your room?" she said quickly. "Is it taken?"

"I'm afraid so," I said, unreasonably annoyed. In the same way I had pursued those who were leaving, but now I couldn't help feeling it was a little ghoulis.

Two girls, strangers to me and obviously new additions to the town, were talking in the powder room.

"Gosh, I'm worried," one said. "We slept through the alarm this morning, and my husband left the house half an hour late. What do you suppose they'll do to him?"

"I don't know what they do here," the other girl said. "Jim was late one morning at Camp Maxie and he was confined to his company area for a week. But," she added hastily, "they probably have a different system here."

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The first girl looked frightened, and I broke into their conversation to try to reassure her.

"My husband was a whole hour late one morning, and nothing happened," I said. "The other guys covered up for him." The worried girl beamed, and somehow I felt good again.

"Boy, that makes me feel better," she said. "I had visions of him in the guard house." She smiled at me, and asked, "Have you been here long?"

"Six months," I said.

"Gee," the girl said, impressed. "I've been here only three weeks, and it seems like forever."

"It gets easier as it goes along," I said, feeling established again.

The evenings were the hardest. Janice or Myra always asked me to come out to dinner with them and their husbands, but I was shy about doing it. No matter how long couples in Neosho had been married, I always felt like a third party on a honeymoon when I tagged along with them. When Spence was there, it was different. Then being with another couple was a party, and we liked it. I started eating dinner very early before the husbands came in so the girls wouldn't feel they had to ask me.

I usually ate at Donnally's where I knew the waitresses well enough to chat with them. The little sign in the entryway, "Couples will please occupy one side of the booths," made me self-conscious and I always ate at the counter.

"I bet your husband is on KP today," my waitress said

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pleasantly the first night after Spencer had gone. The guess made me feel very lonely. I wondered if Spence was eating now, and what. Were they eating out of lunch boxes, or were they using their little white meal tickets in the train diner?

Somehow the soldiers who accosted me as I walked home embarrassed me, and I wasn't able to grin and ignore them as I had been doing for the last six months. I walked quickly with my head down, anxious to get to the house.

The second night was better because Pat Jacobs' husband was on guard duty, and she and I ate together and then went to the movies.

But the time passed very slowly. I wasn't much interested in the girls with their constant Army-plus-marriage-plus-Neosho problems, nor was I very interested in the soldiers who strolled in and out of the club. There was no longer a chance that one of them might be Spencer.

I got a couple of letters from Spence written on the train, in messy difficult handwriting, obviously written while trying to ignore the talking of other men. I felt vastly grateful to him for writing them, and to the canteen workers in the railroad stations who mailed them so promptly for him.

His first letter from Camp Beal came in about ten days, and it didn't give the come-ahead I was waiting for.

"I can't find out a damn thing, honey," he wrote. "No one seems to know why we're here or how long we're

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going to stay. We literally haven't done anything yet. We're just sitting on our tails in characteristic Army fashion. You better stay there a while longer till I see if I can pry some information out of someone." The letter, annoyed at the incredible slowness with which information filtered down to enlisted men, was nevertheless cheerful, and though I was anxious to leave Neosho and worried about what was going to happen to Spence, I didn't feel the same fierce personal resentment against the Army that I had six months ago. One could, I told myself, pleased by my new objectivity, get used to anything.

The letters came daily after that, saying that the rooming situation was tight, that the chow was pretty good at Beal, that he had seen the sex-hygiene movie again ("My God, how many times have I seen that thing now!")

I wrote back jokingly but anxiously. "You better tell me to come out there soon, Spence. I've just finished the last interesting book in the U.S.O. library." The waiting was hard, and after the mail came in the morning, the time dragged. I was always torn between not wanting to leave the house for fear the telegram might come, and wanting to be away to give it time to get there. Finally, two weeks after Spencer left, Janice called me at the Red Cross where I was working that afternoon to say I had a wire.

"I thought it might be from Spencer," she said. "And you'd want to know right away."

I delayed only long enough to finish the bandage I

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was making (and I'm sure one of the understanding volunteers had to redo it when I left) and then took the cloth off my hair, not bothering to comb my hair, and rushed home.

"Take next train for Marysville," the telegram read. "Wire time of arrival. Will try to meet you."

The next train left that afternoon, and Margaret Lewis came over to drive me to the station.

We drove over the dirt roads, through the Negro section, to the Frisco station. I noticed a young colored girl hanging khaki shirts and GI underwear on a clothesline. She drew a pair of the Army's gray wool socks out of her clothesbasket, and was clipping them to the line as we drove out of sight. They were fresh and unstained, and I knew her husband hadn't had them long.

"I bet that girl's new in town," I said to Margaret. "I bet her husband was just drafted."

Margaret grinned. "Probably so," she said. "There's been a tremendous shipment of new colored troops into camp in the last few weeks." She shook her head. "You know, the stream of girls coming in never seems to stop. I swear to God I don't know where they all stay." She suddenly remembered something. "Oh, by the way, I looked up the Travelers Aid records on Marysville for you. It's mighty crowded, but not quite as bad as Neosho."

Although I was reassured by the good news, I realized that I wouldn't have been worried no matter what the report had been. I didn't somehow doubt that I could find a place to live. I hadn't doubted it very seriously

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when I came to Neosho, I remembered, though I knew less about room-hunting then.

My train was late and I urged Margaret not to stay. The wait, like all waits for trains, was almost easier by myself. When she got in her car and drove away, I felt acutely that I would miss the town and its clan of Army wives—not only the few that I had come to know intimately, but also the many that I knew only by sight. Most strongly I knew I would miss Margaret.

I felt subdued and nostalgic as I waited in the Frisco station—the same nostalgia I had felt often in leaving Washington, San Francisco, New York—places I had loved. Never had I felt much affection for the grasping little Army town, essentially out to profiteer from the war, its friendliness more custom than tolerance, but I would miss it because I had belonged in it. Miserable and happy, angry and placid, lonely and contented, I had been an Army wife there for six months, one Army wife among thousands standing on the fringes of the town's life.

Now that I was waiting to leave in the sooty, dirty outskirts, I suddenly visualized Neosho as I imagined I would remember it five years later, with the sun in the park and the farmers grouped around the court house, and the older men raising their hats politely to every woman they passed on the streets. I felt a surge of sympathy for the Army-swamped Neoshoans. Something that Spence had once said came back to my mind.

"Sure," he had said, "a lot of the Neoshoans are stinkers. But a lot of them probably aren't, either. Re-

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member, darling, when we lived in Washington, we wouldn't have wanted a strange government worker living with us."

I picked a seat beside a young girl in the train, and together we looked out at the station until the train pulled out. Her interest was casual—another dirty mid-western depot, humming with war traffic. Mine was just as blind, because I wasn't seeing or thinking of the station itself. I heard the starting jerk resound through each coupling the length of the train, and we were on our way.

The girl, with clean, smooth hair, and no rouge, looked like any one of the girls I had gone to college with. She wore an expensive gray tweed suit and a college-girl sweater, with matching alligator shoes and bag. She was, I guessed, probably a New Yorker.

I had to restrain myself from launching right into a conversation with her—it had become so automatic in Neosho. ("We will probably stare up at the tall buildings, too, when we get back to New York," Spence had once said.) She started talking herself finally, tentative but friendly.

"Do you come from Neosho?" she asked, pronouncing the name as though reading it off the station sign.

"No, I don't," I said simply. I would have chortled at the idea six months before. "My husband's in the Army, and we've been living there for the last few months. We come from New York."

She turned and smiled fully at me.

"Oh, really," she said. "I do too." I recognized the

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eagerness in her voice. It was excitement or maybe relief. Anyway, it was the same tone that had been in my voice when I came from Washington to Neosho.

"I'm an Army wife, too. I'm going out to Fort Bliss to join my husband."

"Is this your first camp-following expedition?" I asked, knowing the answer before she gave it.

"Yes, it is," she said.

She explained that she had been married five months ago, "just two days before Dick was inducted," she said. She had quit college at the end of junior year, and didn't intend to finish.

"Where did you go?" I asked.

"Hunter," she said. "Before the WAVES took over."

She opened her soft leather wallet to show me her husband's picture, and I thought instantly of Tracy Mead. It made me smile inside myself to think how many girls' wallets I had looked into—how many girls had looked into mine—in the last six months. Her questions started coming, and I tried to answer them all, emphasizing how much difference there was between every camp, and every company within every camp. In front of the Neosho wives—many of them camp followers of long standing—I had always felt like a beginner at the game, but in front of this girl I felt like an authority.

"What's it like," she said suddenly and frankly, "living in these hick towns? Can you get decent places to live, and decent food and see a good movie once in a while?"

I had to pause a minute before answering her ques-

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tions. By decent, I guessed she didn't mean only reasonably clean and respectable. I guessed it because I knew I hadn't six months before. I knew that the Dome, the Brown Derby, or even Donnally's wouldn't really be classed as "decent" restaurants in her mind, that the crowded quarters at the Blakes', which had seemed so comparatively good to us, weren't really so desirable, and I tried to remember ever having seen anything but Westerns advertised on the marquees of Neosho's two movie houses. My answer must have been very unsatisfactory.

"Well, we managed in Neosho," I said vaguely. "It was never what you could call luxurious, but we got along."

"What about places to live?" she said, eager to pin me down. "We want to find a furnished apartment. Small, you know. Two or even one room, but clean and convenient."

"They weren't easy to get in Neosho," I said.

She apparently misunderstood me. "Well, we don't have to worry too much about the price," she said, blushing slightly. "Thank God, we aren't trying to live entirely on a private's pay."

"It isn't the price that's the difficulty," I explained. "There just aren't any apartments, or there weren't in Neosho. Maybe the town where you'll live will be bigger, I don't know."

"Where did you live?" she asked. I described the room to her, and it sounded small and cramped.

"Did you have comfortable chairs?" she asked.

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"Well, there was one chair, though not very comfortable," I said, smiling. "We didn't stay in the room much except to sleep."

"But gee," she said, "we want a place where we can read and talk and write letters, and really be at home in, you know."

"We would have liked it, too," I said gently. I had never felt that living at the Blakes' was so unsatisfactory until I described it to an outsider.

She went on to ask me about eating, shocked at the idea of going out for breakfast. "You mean you had to hike all the way downtown for coffee?"

"Half a mile," I said.

I asked her if she had brought an iron.

"No, I didn't bother," she said. "I thought I'd send my laundry out."

"We couldn't get any laundry service in Neosho," I said. "So most of us did both our own and our husbands'."

"The camp has laundries, doesn't it?" she said.

"Yes, but Crowder's were awfully slow, and the men have to do a lot of it themselves or their clean clothes don't hold out. The unmarried men scrub clothes and sew buttons and things at least one night a week, my husband tells me, and the married men bring the stuff home to their wives. The picture of the guys being domestic as hell out at camp has always tickled me," I said, laughing.

She was too concerned with getting information to laugh.

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"Well, I've never done much laundry," she said uncertainly, "but I guess I can learn."

"You should have seen the first uniform I ironed," I said.

We started talking about our husbands.

"Gosh, Dick's gotten a raw deal in the Army," she said. "He's a lawyer, and we thought he'd get some kind of a break with all that education, but it doesn't even look as though he's going to get a chance at OCS."

I started to quote a lawyer friend of ours at Crowder, a private. "Lawyers are a dime a dozen in the Army," he had once told us. "The only difference between us and the guys who've only gone through the eighth grade is that we lawyers probably aren't as useful to the Army." The cynicism might have sounded insulting, and I didn't repeat it.

"Has he tried to get into the Judge Advocate General's office, or any of the places they need lawyers?" I asked.

"Oh, he's tried everything," she said angrily. "And hasn't gotten anywhere. So much of the time, he just doesn't do anything. He's so bored and he hates it so." She turned suddenly to me. "Does your husband like it?"

"No," I answered frankly. "He doesn't like it," but I realized my voice sounded almost insultingly calm. "I don't think he'd get out even if he could, though."

She thought a moment. "No," she said, "I don't suppose Dick would either. Gosh, men are funny." She spoke thoughtfully, and then grew angry again. "But

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gee, why does the Army waste so much time? They treat the men like high-school boys without any sense and waste weeks and weeks of their time. Dick says that the war seems so urgent until you get into the Army, and then you never have enough to do."

I recognized the welling up of pain and frustration. It was the same thing that I had poured into letters to Spencer when I was still in Washington. I felt it still in spurts of hurt and fatigue and boredom. Passionately, I wanted to be able to explain to this girl the things Spence and I had figured out, though I knew that—like me—she wouldn't understand it for months, and then not completely.

"I know it seems incredible at times," I said. "It certainly has to us. We've read the papers and seen what a magnificent job the Army is doing overseas and wondered how it can be when Camp Crowder seems so damn stupid most of the time. But I think we're too close to it," I went on. "We think in terms of our individual husbands, but the Army thinks in terms of thousands and millions. What seems like endless waste of time to one man probably is in the interest of the whole group as a group."

I felt foolish when I had finished, like a person telling a story who discovers his point is no good when he gets to the end. I had said it badly, because I wasn't entirely sure I knew what I was talking about.

The girl looked at me curiously, considering what I had said. She didn't argue, but I knew she wasn't convinced. I don't know why I was disappointed except

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that I had found myself unable to communicate something I had worked so hard to learn.

By the time we had shoved and pushed and waited to get some dinner, and were finally settled back in our seats, we both felt quite gay again.

Marilyn—my seat companion—started pumping Neosho horror stories out of me, and I found they made bitter if sometimes amusing telling.

"There's a boarding house in town that has the damndest ogre of a proprietor," I told her. "She won't permit any food in the rooms or any washing. One friend of mine came back to her room one day to find an unopened box of candy and a pair of stockings she had washed out both dumped in the wastepaper basket. She's the most amazing woman; she just doesn't like soldiers' wives. Girls have told me that she used to gloat when all the men were restricted to camp for some reason or another."

"She sounds inhuman," Marilyn said.

"That's a kind description," I said. "She's one of those people that's on a lot of lists."

"Lists?" Marilyn asked, puzzled.

"You know, the soldiers have lists of people they plan to murder after the war, sergeants mostly," I explained, laughing. "We have lists of people like this bitch."

"And then you run into some of the pettiest economizing," I went on. "There was a landlady in Neosho who only allowed her boarder to have a fifteen-watt bulb in her room, and then came and pounded on the door at ten every night saying that it was time for her to turn her light out. I don't know if it's true, but I've even

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heard of landladies meting out the toilet paper, sheet by sheet."

I told her about prices being hiked on pay day, about the jeweler who got caught selling a soldier an old watch enclosed in a shiny new case, about the tourist-cabin owner who was hauled into court for collecting a hundred dollars a month on a ten-dollar cabin by the simple process of renting it simultaneously to three couples.

I told her about the club and the director and how his iron managerial manner was shot to hell one day when he found a girl nursing her child in the main lounge of the club.

"What did he do?" Marilyn asked.

"He was too floored to do anything. He just retired to his office. One of the YWCA workers finally suggested to the girl that she go in the ladies' room to finish the feeding."

She asked me how much I had managed to see of my husband, and I told her that for the first three months he had had to leave at ten every night.

"Gosh, I should think that would be terrible," she said. "You'd feel so hurried all the time."

"It was terrible," I said. "We hated it."

"And what did you do all day?" she asked.

"That," I said, laughing, "is the question. As a matter of fact, I managed to get a job finally, but for the first few months, I did almost nothing. There's where doing the laundry comes in handy. You wake up happily in the morning, and realize you've got something constructive to do on wash days."

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The lights had already been turned out in our coach when Marilyn's questions began to run out.

"Gee," she said suddenly, and I could just barely see her profile against the window, "the people back in the city think of this as 'the brave little girl starting off on the great adventure.' It isn't much like that, is it?"

"I don't know exactly," I said doubtfully. I was trying—probably too soon—to evaluate life in Neosho. "I suppose maybe in five years it'll seem like that. Mostly it seems to me now just irritating and monotonous."

I saw her head turn and knew she was looking at me.

"Look," she said, "this may sound very personal. But has it been worth it to you? I know it seems worth it to the men. They're in the Army anyway, and having us there is just that much gravy, but is the waiting and the boredom, and," she laughed self-consciously, "the sordidness, worth it to the girls?"

I didn't feel any hesitation about this question. Even when I had hated the Army and Neosho most violently, I had never doubted the answer.

"Yes," I said, "it's worth it. Not just to me, but to every girl I know." I might have sounded sentimental if I had gone on. On the scales against camp following were hundreds of little things, but on the other side was the one big thing. For everyone I knew, the big thing swung the balance. "That's about the only thing I am sure of, Marilyn," I said eagerly. "It definitely is worth it."

"Christ," she said, sighing deeply, "I certainly am glad to hear that." We both laughed.

When Marilyn got off the next afternoon, an elderly

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man sat beside me, and I felt quiet and happy and composed for the rest of the trip. I read all of *Time* and all of the two Pocketbooks I had bought in Neosho, surprised to find how well I could concentrate. On my trip from Washington, I remembered, I had read only two chapters the whole way.

The train pulled into Marysville the morning of the third day, only two hours late. Arriving at ten o'clock in the morning, I wasn't really surprised that Spence wasn't at the station. Soldiers, I thought, might have nothing to do, but it's a rare private that can wangle his way out of camp at ten in the morning. I thought this with amusement, and without bitterness. I didn't know if Spencer had a reservation for me anywhere or not. I didn't know how long we were staying, or where, or under what conditions. But sitting in the station, to make sure Spence didn't turn up, with my single bag standing alongside me, I felt unreasonably gay.

In half an hour I decided he wasn't coming, and I got in the one cab left at the station.

"I'd like to go to the U.S.O.," I told the driver, knowing that Spence would look for me there. Staring curiously out the window as we drove, I saw the red, white and blue U.S.O. signs. We passed tourist camps, larger, better ones than Neosho's, but made familiar by their emphatic "No Vacancy" signs. I noticed the permanent-looking "Waitress Wanted" signs in the restaurant windows, and the tacky military stores. One had a placard in the window advertising "We have WAAC shirts," with a large red-pencil line drawn through one of the A's in WAAC. I thought with amusement that this man

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read the papers more closely than the proprietor of Colby's military store in Neosho. I noticed girls strolling in the streets, window-shopping idly, appraising dresses and shoes that they had probably appraised dozens of times before.

The Army prophylactic station was more central in this town, but it looked like the same building I had seen in Neosho. Hundreds of them with their little naked green bulbs, stamped out on a production line and spread to every Army town in the country.

A girl I passed walking into the U.S.O. smiled uncertainly at me, not sure, I knew, whether she had ever seen me before or not. I knew it didn't matter that she hadn't, because the steps of the U.S.O. identified us both, and gave us the right to smile at each other. I carried my bag in through the door, noticing the mailbox in the entry just as in Neosho. In the entry stood the reception desk, with the same guest book, the same conveniently sharpened pencil. I signed my name, without waiting to be asked to, and noted that the address scrawled above mine in large, confident letters, was simply "Bk'lyn." Involuntarily I giggled, and the receptionist looked up at me.

"Find someone you know?" she asked pleasantly.

"Well, not really," I said, smiling back at her. "It just seems kind of familiar."

I put my bag in the check room, and sat down near the telephones, to wait for the call from Spencer that I knew would eventually come.

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